

PASTOR SCOTT: Hey, Freshwater. I love that song that the team just led us in worship with, "You Are Worthy Of It All."

It is a pure adoration, like, from the heart. So clear, "God, you are worthy of it all."

The imagery, pulling out of the Old Testament, of when they'd burn incense as worship, and then our praise is the incense that rises up to Christ. I just love it. Our praise glorifying him, the aroma that fills his courts.

This morning, I want to actually start with Psalm 42, and it's a psalm of worship. The psalmist is in a hard place in time. He says this, "As the deer pants for the water, so my soul longs for you. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God? My tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me all day long, 'Where is your God?'"

"These things I remember, as I pour out my soul: How I would go with the crowd and lead them in procession to the house of God with glad shouts and songs of praise, a

multitude keeping festival."

I think what is interesting is the psalmist hasn't been able to gather with the people of God to worship at the house of the Lord. Whether it's the tabernacle or the temple, I'm not sure, but it sounds really familiar, doesn't it? And he's writing these things going, "Oh, I just wish I could get together with the people of God and just worship Him. Just worship Him."

And I love that that's in the Word. Like, there is something about when we gather to worship. He misses it, and I think that's, obviously, where we are right now. It's been taken away from us, and we're all maybe writing a different psalm, but looking forward to that day when we're going to be able to gather together.

Even as we heard this last week, I mean, there's all kinds of opinions on when this could happen. Could it happen in a month? Could it happen in six months? Maybe in a year? I mean, nobody knows. Everybody has an opinion, but nobody knows. So at this point, it seems pretty self-evident, a large

gathering, 200, 300 people like we have on a Sunday morning is not going to be for us for a while.

What we've been talking about over these last two weeks and now this final day is looking forward and looking ahead. What does it look like? I want to give -- speak into that in a different way today, and I want to read out of Acts, Acts 8.

It says this in the first four verses, "There arose that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem. They were all scattered throughout the region of Judea, Samaria, except the apostles. Devout men buried Stephen" -- he had just been stoned to death in chapter 7 -- "And they made great lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison. Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word."

Now, I don't want to suggest what we're going through is anything like what the early church went through at all. Persecution versus shelter at home, two different things.

And just the life-altering moves of really taking what you could carry and fleeing the city, it's not even close to what we're going through. But there's two ideas here. There's two ideas, realities, that are happening in these two verses. It's this: One is dispersion, and the other is mission.

Dispersion and mission. I want to talk about those for a second. What happened with dispersion is the leaders of Israel, the Jewish leaders who had just been part of crucifying Christ and calling for his death, they wanted to stamp out these people who were following Christ and his way, calling him the Messiah. They wanted to stamp it out.

It was effectively like this, they wanted to stop it spreading, so they took out a stick and went up to a fire that was burning. Meanwhile, it's dry. Imagine it's in the summer. You're in the forest or you're out in the plains, and there's fields everywhere. It is dry, ready to be lit on fire.

They go up to this fire and try to put it out by beating it with a stick, right? What happens? Let's say high winds are there,

too. It throws sparks everywhere. Pretty soon, you have fire all around. That's effectively what happened in chapter 8. They tried to put it out, and in trying to put it out, they spread it all over the world in a few moments.

The unintended consequences of persecution was dispersion. But it wasn't just dispersion, it was also mission. Because what happens in verse 4 is so fascinating, "Those who were scattered, those who were dispersed, went about preaching the word."

It's the mission, right? Dispersion, mission. Christianity would not have spread without people spreading the good news of Christ, the word about Jesus. So what does the future look like for us? We're not going through persecution, nothing like that. But there is this reality that we are now dispersed. The question, what are we going to do in this dispersion with the mission, and what does it mean to be a Christian in this?

This is what I want to talk about just for a few moments here. So we can't meet, and who knows how long that could go on. We're

dispersed. In reality, we're dispersed -- there's about 15, I don't know, 17 communities within a 10-minute, 20-minute drive of here, 15-minute drive. We're all dispersed into our different communities in the country, maybe more in the city.

We're all staying at home. We're all stuck in our neighborhoods. We're all wondering what's going to happen. What's going to happen to Freshwater? What's going to happen to me? What's going to happen to you? What is going to happen to everyone's faith? Is the church going to die? Is the church going to kind of dissolve because we can't gather?

I want to borrow an illustration from Daniel Yang. He is a Christian leader out of Wheaton, Illinois. He leads a think tank called Send. This illustration is from him. He said in the game of chess -- so imagine the game of chess, and I have the chess board right here, right? You have all these pieces to play in chess.

What happens, is the one piece that, when you begin chess, that you love the

most is the queen. The queen can go either on the white spaces or the dark spaces. It doesn't matter. It can go forwards and backwards and diagonal. It's the strongest piece on the board. Let's say somebody starts out with chess. What are they going to do? They're going to overrely on the queen. They'll focus on the queen as much as they can. What ends up happening is they don't utilize all the other pieces.

Strategically, if someone who has played chess a while, they're looking at this and understanding, "Hey, I'm going to use all my pieces," and they figure someone is overrelying on one piece, especially the queen, it'll become a liability. They're going to see it as a weakness and totally go after their opponent that way.

What's happened -- and here's where the metaphor, I think, works for us. What's happened is the church, for a long time, has identified the queen in chess, as it were, as the Sunday morning service, and rightfully so. Like, the queen is a powerful piece within our faith. The gathering, so much happens when we

gather together to worship. You read this even in Psalms 42 and all kinds of places, the call to gather, the saints to gather and worship God. It's not wrong to say that.

The problem that has happened in the church is there is an overreliance on the queen. And, effectively, what's happened is the queen is off the board. Whether we like it or not, we don't get to use the queen anymore. And the question now we're facing and wrestling with, and you're wrestling with as you're sitting at home, is what do we do next? What does this look like going forward?

So this is what I want to talk about, just real clearly. I want to just give you a clear picture of what this looks like, what we're going to do as we go forward. What we're going to do is this: We're going to wring every ounce of opportunity out of this moment.

We're going to take it for all we can and use what is one of these un -- I said I was never going to say that word -- unusual, something we've never experienced -- what's another synonym for that word I'm not going to

say again?

We want to lean into this and say, "Hey, looking forward, wait a minute, so the queen is off. We can't gather on Sunday mornings. What do we do?"

Charles Spurgeon, a famous English pastor, lived in the 1800s. This guy struggled. He was really sick a lot, struggled with a lot of health things. He said this once, he said, "I venture to say, the greatest blessing that God can give any of us is health."

Let me say that again, "I would venture to say the greatest blessing that God could give to any of us is health. With the exception of sickness. Sickness has frequently been of more use to the saints of God than health has."

Folks, this moment could, in fact, become an incredible blessing. Here's why. As a staff, we have been looking over the last couple years at what are some of the, like, big trends, meta trends happening within North American churches, that are healthy churches, that we would say, "Yeah, these people are

living for the mission. They're on track. They're on point."

Some of these trends were very concerning of what we were seeing, and very difficult to understand how to adapt and how to change. Some of the changes we were looking at, like, how do you pull this off?

Let me talk about the trends and what we were seeing. People were burned out. I wouldn't say it was, like, 100 percent, but what we were hearing was so many people were burned out, going so fast, going at a high rate, running RPMs so high, and just not able to keep up. I mean, that's a big duh, like, "Oh, wow, you guys are figuring that out," right?

It's happening, right? We're seeing people serving the church burned out. We're seeing the team struggling to recruit because people are burned out. We're hearing nationally about staff on churches, right, full-time staff, ministry staff, burned out because they're going so hard, trying to keep everything going. That's one trend.

Another trend we're hearing about,

seeing, and experiencing is these are in healthy churches. All of a sudden, the churches across North America were declining. It wasn't unhealthy churches. You have to keep that in mind. These churches had track records, years of growth and health. What they were finding is people were stopping. They weren't coming.

Those who were coming, even though, you know, they'd say, "Yeah, I'm committed, I'm in," they're coming maybe once every four to six weeks. We're seeing that at Freshwater. More evidence that something is broken, something is not working.

We're not sure entirely -- I can't say 100 percent -- but I wonder, as I think about that quote from Spurgeon, I wonder if, actually, this moment right now could be a gift. As we look ahead, I think it might be a gift. If I would have come to this church back in January and said, "Look, what we need to do because we're seeing these trends is we need to shut down the services, take six months, step back, evaluate, gain perspective and figure out what needs to change," if I came to the church

to do that, I'd probably fire myself, then the elders and the staff would have accepted it, like, "What do you mean you're not doing any service? We're shutting it down except for maybe online?"

It'd be that radical. Think about it, in January. Now, we're used to it. Yeah, of course. The reason why we're okay with it was it wasn't our decision. It was forced on us. We didn't have a choice. We're doing what we have to do just to adapt and change. Now, we have a moment where we can look at these early Christians and see, what did they do when they were dispersed?

It was different reasons it was forced on them, and it was so much more radical, painful, and cataclysmic in terms of what had happened. There's still an idea here of dispersion and what they did with it. What's fascinating is they didn't have the queen. They got pushed out, out to all these places. They did something with it though. It says that they were scattered and went about preaching the word.

Church, the queen is gone. It's

gone for a while. We're doing this online, and this is good. I think all of us would say, hey, there's actually great pieces about it, who we're connecting to, and the net is a whole lot broader of who is able to come in on this thing.

But we have a whole chess board of pieces as Christians. I just want to speak to that. As I'm looking ahead, and as the staff is looking ahead, it's not like Freshwater, this is all we've been doing. We have a whole bunch of pieces here. We've been talking about investing in community groups for years. It's one of the reasons why we speak about it so much and say, "Hey, look, if you want meaningful, deeper growth, with authentic transparency, relational connection, accountability, Bible study, it happens in the context of our community groups."

That's one of the pieces that we talk about all the time and we're running. It's not like we're trying to catch up to speed. It's going. We've been investing in Bible studies, and one that's going on right now with women. We've been investing in the

theology classes and all these pieces that are so critical to the Christian life and, you know, equipping the body of Christ.

We've been investing in leadership development almost ten years. Really slow, real quiet. What I love is, right now, in this moment, we have leaders stacked around Freshwater like firewood. Like, they're just everywhere. And we've been creating and elevating prayer at the River. We have two groups that pray on Thursdays. We have another group that prays on Friday. Right now, we have over 160 people signed up to pray one day a week for 30 minutes.

We're praying as a church. We're calling everybody to do it. Sign up. If you haven't signed up, do it. It's not to get credit. It's so encouraging when you -- when I get online and I see who all is praying, I'm like, that is awesome. Sign up.

We're praying for our country. We're praying that God would prune us and clean us. We're praying that God would fill and anoint every person here at Freshwater and Freshwater as a church. His presence would

fill this church and lead us.

These are things we've been pouring tremendous amount of resources in all these years. It's people. One of the things that we've seen in this past week, we've talked about, Alpha, hey, invite guests. I know some of you are skeptical about this still. We had over 50 guests at our Alpha two nights ago. Over 50. 50. It was staggering to be on that Zoom meeting and see all the people there. Some of you may be watching today.

It was just so cool, and people are asking, like, real questions. We get to the end of the first session and we ask this question, "If there was a god, and you could ask that god any question, what question would you ask?"

People were asking just intense questions, like, "What happens to someone if they die of an overdose? Would God let them into heaven or not?"

Another question is, "Why would God allow people to struggle with addictions?"

It's some real tough questions. If you're sitting here, and you don't know of a

place to process questions, and you want to figure out what to believe or not believe, and do it in a place that's safe, jump into our Alpha. Get on our web site. It's freshwater -- thefreshwater.church. I don't even know my web site. Thefreshwater.church.

You'll find it right there on the opening page, there's a little block you click for Alpha. Get connected to that. It is a great place. It is a safe place to question and to ask and to figure out what it means to follow Christ.

And I'm saying all that because as we're going forward, I just want you to know, staff is not pressing the panic button. Like, there's so much health here. There's so many pieces that we've been using and developing and we're ready for. It's encouraging. Yet, as we're looking at this, as we're moving forward, we're seeing an opportunity for change.

We're talking about, what needs to change to address some of the macro trends that we've been seeing in America? About how the spiritually lost, how those who are trying to seek answers, how are they interacting with the

Sunday morning service? Do they come anymore?
What do we do with burnout? How do we handle
all these questions?

So we're looking at this and
saying, "Change has got to happen," and we
don't know what that looks like.

I need to ask something of you,
those of you who walked with Christ for a
while. I'm going to ask something of you. I
need your help. I need your years of God's
faithfulness and steadfastness you've
experienced through all kinds of change. I
need your words and I need your presence as we
go through this time. We're going to need your
leadership. Change is here. More change and
disruption is probably coming with all of this.

Some of you, many of you, have been
through change in the church. I mean, you have
seen -- it's no lie -- you have seen the colors
on a wall be painted different. It's
staggering. You've been around when people
have changed the color of carpets. I know,
that's just amazing, to think that could
happen. It's just staggering. Right, we joke
about that.

You've seen other change. Worship styles, right? Ministry, what programs we do. You've been through change. Some of you have been through so many pastors, who come in with a strategy, a different strategy, they come and they go.

Christ is there, and Christ is faithful. The church goes forward. What I mean is now, what this church is going to need is you and your ability to say, "Hey, look, change isn't going to kill us. God is still going to lead. God is still going to be faithful."

Looking forward, we're going to need the steadying influence from everyone as we go forward.

The other thing as we look at this, we are dispersed. Until we get back together, we need to keep praying. I'm going to beat this drum. We've got to keep praying. I can't wait for that day, when we get back together. I am telling you, God is going to answer prayer. In fact, it's amazing what God has been doing, even this past week, with conversations and people. Their spiritual

hunger.

Here, looking forward, this is what I want to leave you with, as I just wind this message down. Looking forward, until that day when we can gather together, and what is going to happen, this is what I want to challenge you to do: Grow. Grow.

Until that day we get to worship again, come back healthier. Come back stronger in your faith. Grow. Preach the word. Until that day we get to all be together in these services, praising Him, reach out to those who have no anchor for the soul, pull them along. Pull along your brothers and sisters in Christ, grow.

We have so many things that Christ has given the church, and he anoints and he blesses and he uses, to strengthen our faith, to equip us, to live the mission. The picture I have looking forward is -- this is crazy. I don't know if you even thought about this -- but I actually think Freshwater can grow. I think we can actually come back bigger, healthier, stronger.

Because we don't -- this queen is

great, but the church, when I look at the church here, when I look at the church in China, who never got to gather, how does a church who never really gets to gather, they're in small groups, right, and it explodes in communist China where they shut it down. It's the same story that happened in Vietnam.

We plant some churches, then we're kicked out of the country. I think in the '60s or something like that, we're able to go back to Vietnam for 30 years. All of a sudden, we find Vietnam, where you couldn't celebrate, gather together in a public service, they couldn't do that, the church explodes.

Folks, we can grow. We can. Preach the word. Preach the word. Now you're stuck with your neighbors, whether you like them or not. They're right across the street. They're right next to you. Reach out to them.

I just talked to somebody this past week. The Covid-19 has pushed them to completely re-evaluate their life. It has pushed them. They know they have not been walking towards God. They know it. They're like, "Something has got to change."

We just had a phenomenal time. God moved in our conversation. At the end of it, they're just like -- and God really just, in a powerful way, just set this person free, lifted off a bunch of stuff, a bunch of baggage.

You know what the comment was at the end? It was, "People need to know this. I've got to tell people. I know so many people that have the same story. I have to tell them my story. They need to know. I've never experienced this kind of, like, weightlessness, like the guilt and the shame, gone."

Folks, this is a season that we can come into and we can see Christ move. We can. We can grow. We're dispersed, but we can still live for Christ and preach his word.

Let me just pray over you this blessing. Jesus, where each person is, and whoever is listening, I pray for those who are longing for something more right now and maybe are struggling with how to connect with you. Holy Spirit, would you just touch them right now. I just release your peace on them.

Lord, for our church, those who call Freshwater home, would you come and fill

them with a vision of what you see these months ahead looking like for them. Your dream for them. Jesus, would you show your favor to Freshwater in this moment here and these days ahead. Would you release your peace. Would you release your joy, your love, your hope.

I know some people had really bad days this last week. Some really bad ones. Jesus, would you just intervene, and would you create just a place where they are, where it's you and them. Encourage them today. Protect them, Jesus.

We love you so much, Lord. We love you so much. Would you continue to lead each person, continue to lead Freshwater. Amen.