

Welcome

The Standard Oil Building in Chicago was finished in 1973. At time of completion, it was the city's tallest building, earning it the nickname 'Big Stan'. (Its claim to fame only lasted a year, until the Sears Tower was completed... today the Aon Center, as it's called, is Chicago's third tallest building.)

Besides being the tallest building in the Chicago skyline, Big Stan's other claim to fame was the beautiful Carrara marble that covered it. Carrara marble is a beautiful white or blue-grey marble prized by sculptors and builders since Ancient Rome. Rome's famous Pantheon is Carrara marble, as is Michelangelo's David. London's Marble Arch and the Harvard Medical School use Carrara marble. In short, it's a big deal, a status symbol. And when Big Stan was completed in 1974, it was the biggest building in the world to be covered entirely in Carrara marble.

On Christmas Day, 1973, in the middle of construction, a 350-pound slab of that beautiful Carrara marble detached from the building and crashed through the roof of the Prudential Center. Whoops. The building was finished, however, and everything seemed fine.

Until a little over a decade later, in 1985, when building inspectors found cracks running all over the building. It turns out that Carrara marble is just too thin and delicate to cover such a large building. Standard Oil - which had just renamed itself Amoco - used metal straps to hold the marble together. That lasted another five years, and then between 1990 and 1992, Amoco spent more than \$80 million dollars (which was over half the original cost of the building!) to resurface the building with white granite.

Big Stan *looked* great, and I'm sure those in the know took great pleasure from boasting that the same marble Michaelangelo chose for his masterpiece gilded their building.

But Carrara marble wasn't suited for that building. Someone, somewhere, missed a key calculation, and by the time anyone noticed it was too late. Ultimately, it was an \$80 million mistake.

I thought a lot about Big Stan as I was preparing this message. Because we're talking about a faith built to last, and I think all of us would love to have a faith that's a Big Stan faith - a robust, sturdy faith. Not necessarily better than everyone else's, but a faith that shapes the world around us, that becomes an essential part of the skyline of our community.

But how many of us, after a few years, start to notice some cracks in our faith? Questions that seemed small when we were younger grow bigger and bigger. Or maybe a crisis hits and we're rocked, our building less able to weather the storm than we thought it was.

How many of us have woken up one day and realized we've built our faith out of something less-than-ideal, and it's in danger of crashing down?

We're going to talk about why that happens today, and why it's not all bad news. In fact, by the time we leave today, we'll find that God is present in the midst of our deconstructing. It's actually a grace and a gift.

Message

We're in a series called "Faith Under Construction". For the next month, we are asking, "What are the essential components of a strong faith? How do we build a faith that can weather the storms of life? A faith that keeps us secure no matter what comes our way, a faith that is open and courageous. How do we get that kind of faith that makes us infectious, that person who has a deep love of God, a person you just want to be around. A person who is actively making their world a better place.

[Scripture Slide 1] We're in 1 Corinthians chapter 3. This is a letter to a young congregation - maybe only a couple of years old at this point. And the Apostle Paul, who planted the church, is writing to address some cracks he's noticed in their congregation. Paul uses a building metaphor to advise the Corinthian Christians on what they need to grow stronger. We began where all good buildings begin: a strong foundation. According to Paul, the only foundation of a strong faith is Jesus.

When we say "Jesus is our foundation," we're making a powerful claim: that we enter into a life of faith because God sought us out. Our faith isn't about how good we can be, how many rules we follow or how hard we work. A strong faith, a true faith, a faith that's built to last is built on nothing but what Jesus has done for us.

Last week, we asked, What kind of building are we building on the foundation? What is the shape of our faith? We saw that Paul envisions us as a Temple. The faith we're building transforms us into an overlap between heaven and earth. We become, like Jesus, a source of life and hope.

Faith is a project that lasts a lifetime, and the longer you're a person of faith, and for nearly everyone I've ever met, sooner or later, that project hits some problems.

For some of us, it's when a crisis hits. Maybe someone close to us suffers from a terminal disease, and no amount of prayers for healing have an effect. A spiritual mentor passes away. A divorce. A deep trauma. We're changed by those experiences, and it's usually the case that the house of faith we inhabited before the crisis doesn't feel like home anymore on the other side.

For others, it can simply be a byproduct of getting older. This happens for a lot of us who grow up in church. We're handed a faith that was built by a lot of other hands. It's a mixture of good stuff and bad stuff but we're kids, so we don't have any way to distinguish.

Either way, whether it's through crisis or as an organic part of growing in your faith, there comes a time when we have to ask, "Are we building the right thing?" And for pretty much everyone, the hard truth is that some of what we've been building with isn't great material.

As we read today, I want you to keep an image in mind. They didn't have building codes or building inspectors in Paul's day, but what he's about to describe is essentially that. Paul looks ahead to the End, when Jesus returns, when the building project of our faith is completed. He imagines God inspecting the building of our faith - that temple from last week. We're going to see two things today: one, that God takes faith really seriously. There are real consequences to not building a solid faith. But two, God is always gracious and loving. Just because we've been doing it wrong, or building with some wrong materials, God is with us and will work to rescue us and make us whole.

So let's take a look at what Paul goes on to say to the Corinthians beginning in verse 11:

For no one can lay any foundation other than the one we already have—Jesus Christ. Anyone who builds on that foundation may use a variety of materials—gold, silver, jewels, wood, hay, or straw. But on the judgment day, fire will reveal what kind of work each builder has done. The fire will show if a person's work has any value. If the work survives, that builder will receive a reward. But if the work is burned up, the builder will suffer great loss. The builder will be saved, but like someone barely escaping through a wall of flames. -- 1 Corinthians 3:11-15

Our faith will be tested at the End, by fire! These are some verse that a lot of church folk don't realize are in the Bible. After all, if I said, "Think of final judgment and fire and what do you think of?" You would say, "Hell, duh."

Churches talk a lot about the fires of hell. But we don't talk very often about the fires of Heaven. And yet here is Paul, talking to a church, about how *they* will be tested *by fire* on the Last Day.

This causes a few emotions for us. Surprise - we thought fire was only for the unbelievers. Fear - because we thought salvation was about being rescued from fire. And anxiety - after all, how can we be sure we'll be protected?

Paul's vision of the End presses on our picture of salvation. Salvation isn't a transaction where we say a prayer so God gives us a ticket to Heaven. Salvation is transformation. We're building something, and building is fundamentally an act of shaping the world. We're crafting something out of space and parts.

Paul uses the metaphor of building materials to get at what we already know: that transformation isn't automatic. Like any relationship, we can invest time in it or we can ignore it. We can enter into a life of faith but resist the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. It doesn't have to be intentional - we can ignore spiritual practices, let busyness be an excuse for not worshipping together or participating in those providential relationships like C-Groups. None of that is *necessary*. You can go to church and not be transformed. You can own a Bible or have a great Bible app downloaded and not be transformed. You can give to the Church and not be transformed.

Paul says we can build our faith with materials that don't stand the test of time. When it comes time to inspect the building, those of us who are untransformed will be exposed. Paul says, "**The builder will be saved, but like someone barely escaping through a wall of flames.**" -- 1 Corinthians 3:15

Would it surprise you to learn I find great hope in these words? I was raised in Church, so I received a faith - from my parents, from my grandparents, from the churches in which I grew up - pastors and Sunday school teachers and other mentors. The faith I inherited was a mixture of good and bad. I was fortunate to grow up surrounded by people who affirmed again and again God's deep love for me. That foundation Ashley talked about a couple of weeks ago was laid well and strong for me. But I was also taught you had to believe in a literal reading of the whole Bible - from the creation stories in Genesis to the sort of Left Behind take on the End Times. I was told by a lot of people that if I didn't read the whole Bible literally, I might as well not be a Christian. I was also raised in a really segregated faith - my church in high school was nearly a thousand people, but no families of color. I was a junior in college before I read any theology from a non-White perspective, and that was in one class.

So I had these huge blind spots in my faith (trust me, those weren't the only two). In addition to the gold, silver and gems - God's love, a community of prayer, a commitment to be together despite differences, I also built my faith with wood, hay and straw. Stuff that wouldn't stand the test of time. (Though of course I didn't know it then. No one told me, "If you build your faith on a literal interpretation of Genesis 1, it's going to cause you a lot of problems later." Or, "A faith that's only informed by people who look like you misses the whole of Jesus' good news.")

Here's the thing that haunts me: sure, I've seen those areas, and grown in them (hopefully am still growing in them!). But what if there are places I'm building with wood, hay and straw that I still don't know about? What if I make it to the end and I never saw them? That's not just a What if. Surely none of us gets faith *perfect*. If there were a theology final, surely none of us would ace it.

And Paul says, "That's true. But whether your building is 10% wood or 99% wood, you'll still make it in. The builder will be saved."

I take great comfort in that. Jesus will finish the work he started in me, one way or the other. It may take till the literal end of time, but Jesus will transform me into who I was created to be. He will burn out the impurities, the sin, the spaces I didn't let him transform. And yeah, that'll hurt. But it's the good pain. The pain of transformation. The pain of resurrection. The pain of salvation.

And here's the thing - sometimes that pain doesn't come at the end of the world. It just comes at *an* end of the world. That crisis hits, the storm rolls in, and you find your faith wasn't as strong as you thought it was. You believed all the right things, and she still left. You did all the right things and they still died. And suddenly there's this burning fire inside you and it feels like your whole life is turning to ash and you wish you could go back and be different.

I said, "One way or another" because there's another option: I can just sort of coast, wait for my life to catch fire before I worry about all this. Or I can be intentional about testing my faith. I can do sort of controlled burns. Test things.

That comes more naturally for some of us than others. If you're like me, you were made to ask questions. You find pretty much everything endlessly fascinating, and questions about faith come naturally to you (you might, in fact, have been part of a congregation where you were seen as a threat because you question everything).

For others among us, questioning isn't so easy. You don't care how things work. You have better things to worry about. You enjoy a simple, straightforward faith. There's nothing wrong with that either, necessarily. But we all have the same obligation to be sure we're building faith with the right tools. That's why it's important for you to be a part of a faith community like Catalyst, one that encourages asking questions, testing things - including sermons! (I never expect any of you to take anything I or anyone on the preaching team says at face value. We work really hard, but we're all humans with imperfect theology. We're going to get it wrong sometimes. So test us! It's okay!)

So make room for your curious friends, and learn to ask questions with them. Test what you've been given. Test the stuff out of which you're building your faith. Learn how to do those controlled burns. Deconstruct your faith now... don't wait for your life to blow up or for the end.

Let us be the people of God as fully as we can in the here and now! Let us be a people who is seeking after Jesus, who build lives that, by God's grace, are as loving and joy-filled and peace-making and patient and kind and generous and gentle and faithful and self-controlled as they can be!

We don't have to wait for that. Jesus is our foundation. The Holy Spirit is building with us.

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] Jesus' love is our foundation

1. Where does my faith in Jesus feel solid?
2. Where does my faith feel shaky or unreliable?
3. How can I lean into the process of deconstruction this week?
4. What does it look like to stay grounded in Jesus' love for me this week?

Assignment + Blessing