

***Wise Builders***

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Pastor Scott Austin

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[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Dan Proctor]

The third reading for today is Matthew 7:24-29, 788 in your red Bibles. Jesus is speaking to the crowd: “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!” Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.”

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

I was in New York City with some friends once. I'd like to tell you this was when I was like in 9th grade or something, but it was while I was in college. I was in my... I was probably past 20 at this point, which is to say old enough to know better. We're walking down the street, I think it was probably Canal Street, and someone handed me a ticket and said, “hey buddy”. Now that's red flag number one, when they say “hey buddy” just keep walking. But they said something like, “if you bring this ticket into that room over there, you can win a prize.” I was like, I like prizes, so I went into the room, against my better judgment, and in the room was a dice game -- I told you I should've known better -- and it was the kind of dice game where you pay a little bit of money to have them roll the dice if certain numbers come up or certain amounts come up you win, you know, double your money back. And you guys are going to be super super surprised: on the first roll I got double my money back and on the second roll also and then on the third and fourth and fifth roll I didn't get my money back and pretty soon I was like down to 0 and the guy's like, “well you can keep going, the odds are pretty good at this point that you're going to start, you know, it's going to even out, right.” And my friend Dave, who was, I'm so glad he was with me because I'd probably still be in that room, he's like, “I really think maybe we should go.” And I'm like, “no, Dave, did you hear what he just said, like the numbers are...”

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It was probably a miracle that I ever lived in Las Vegas and ever made it out of that town because this is just like who I was, right. I was convinced that this was anything but the very obvious scam that it was.

And I look back on that time and I have one very simple question: how could I have been so foolish? I think back on lots of moments in my life, actually, and ask that one simple question: how could I have been such a fool? How could I have said something so stupid? How could I have believed what that person told me when it was so obviously not true? How could I believe that “disturb” was spelled with a “v” at the end instead of a “b”? That's one from my childhood. I don't know if you have these memories, that you just can't shake. That one seems very stupid to me in retrospect, like you misspelled a word bud, its ok. But I have this like lingering, self-loathing about those times in my past. Am I the only one? I hope I'm not, because I should probably stop if I am. I wonder if you've ever had, like, some old misunderstanding, or a mistaken belief, or an embarrassing former political view. About that one, my Twitter account is protected so that you can't go back and read what I thought about politics in 2007. Unless you are already following me, I probably should just delete it.

It's possible you've had this kind of revelation about your religious beliefs, that maybe you once held to an overly simplistic view of God or the universe or a certain aspect of it and then one day you had an epiphany, this dawning of new realization and understanding and it immediately changed your mind. And now when you look back on it you think, “whoa how could I have been so foolish?” religious version. But, what about when it goes the opposite way? Have you ever had that experience? When you find that your beliefs are not evolving but in fact they are fading, they might even be disintegrating. In that case that may feel much more serious than just “oh boy I was so silly when I was young”. That might feel like, “I'm going in the wrong direction, I'm supposed to be getting more faithful, more religious, more devout as I get older. I'm supposed to have more things figured out, not fewer things figured out.”

And when you're experiencing doubt or disorientation, when your religious or spiritual life seems to be falling apart or falling down around you, that can be an incredibly painful experience. And if that's the case, if you have that pain already -- and I know that many of you do -- then it's quite possible, maybe even likely, that Jesus' teaching from today's Gospel reading might actually make you feel worse, not better. Let me explain what I mean.

First of all, look at that teaching. Jesus is talking about a “foolish man who built his house on sand, the rain fell and the floods came and the winds blew and beat against that house and it fell and great was its fall.” And when we hear those words we might feel a sting of pain or of shame or embarrassment and the reason is if our current religious or spiritual experience feels

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like the house is being washed away doesn't that mean that I'm a fool? Doesn't that mean that I was duped or I was not discerning enough or that I believed something that was not true all along?

Today we are starting a new series here at Artisan for the season of Lent and the series is called "The Deconstruction Project." Actually it's more than just a series, it's more than just the sermons on Sundays. I expect that this will be a church-wide movement, something that we engage in all throughout the season of Lent, not just on Sundays. But, for many people it's harder with each passing day to hold on to the faith that they used to hold. And many of us have experienced, or are still experiencing what we might call deconstruction.

I'll recognize right at the beginning here, on week one, that yes, "deconstruction" is kind of a buzz word if you run in sort-of Christian circles, especially the social media dominated ones. This word might be feeling very tired to you at this point, I'll just ask you to kind of cope with that, as I will too. Because I do think it accurately reflects the state that many people in the room right now, many people who are represented by you, who are in the "room of Artisan" but not here in the physical room today, for many of you, for many of us, it's a word that describes our state of being actually quite well. And I always say it's a great honor that Artisan Church has really, for its whole history, been a safe harbor where people are allowed to be honest about that kind of thing and they're allowed to process it here. And, you know, that's not at all to say that we're perfect or that we've never messed anything up. That's not what I'm trying to say at all, I just want to say that I'm honored by the fact that if you're having that experience, you're in the room today, right.

The experience of deconstruction, I think, can actually and ultimately be quite healthy, but it can be very confusing and painful when you're experiencing it and worse than that, or kind of compounding that, it can be hard... it's very easy to get stuck in that state and it can be really hard to know when, or how, or maybe even if you want to move past it or move through it into something that looks more like "reconstruction". And it seems like it takes forever and now we have a very poignant reminder all around us, and have for many, many weeks now that construction work takes longer than we want it to. That's true in the building and it's true in our souls.

I guess, what I want to say at the outset is that wherever you are in this experience of deconstruction, if faith doesn't come as easy to you as it used to, this experience is for you. And I will encourage you not only to attend Sundays during the season of Lent, but also to come to our Tuesday night deconstruction workshops. Those are an experience and a time where we can be much more reflective about our own experiences, where we can be a lot more

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interactive with each other and kind of compare notes and maybe help each other along in that experience. This Tuesday night's at 6:30, hour and a half, not a long time, we do have childcare provided, just if you need childcare and haven't told me already, tell me that you'd like it so we can plan ahead. But we want everybody who's available to be there on Tuesday nights. And I'm still working on a way to either kind of livestream the front facing stuff on those events or record them so that they can be viewed later. Of course, we wouldn't livestream people's personal sharing experiences. But, Tuesday nights are going to be an important part of this series as well.

Last thing, before I kind of get into the specifics of today's story, I want to say brief words to those of you who are not in a season of deconstruction, who maybe are like, "oh this is going to be a long Lent this year because I'm just not having that kind of experience in my faith right now." I've talked to several of you who feel that way, actually. There was a time when I felt that way and I would encourage you to continue to be here, to be part of this experience. You can actually, by being in that more integrated space, you might be of help to people who are around you. And also it might be the kind of thing that you can store up for future use. That might come in handy, ask me how I know. I went through all of seminary and learned all kinds of stuff about the philosophy of religion, including how to deal with the problem of human suffering, and it never really bothered me and then one day it really bothered me. And I'm not saying that those things made it easy to get through that experience but I did have some information, some tools in my toolbox that I got to use for the first time. So, you might benefit from being here, even if you're not in that experience.

And also there are some who maybe had that experience and are like, "yeah it's good I ripped that down, because it was awful. That religious house that I was living in was oppressive to me, it was harmful or hurtful to me. I don't actually have very much interest in building it back up." If that's you, I want you to be here too, because I think that there's just some goodness that you bring to us and that this experience will bring to you.

So, today's topic is about what to do when you feel like your spiritual house has been washed away in a storm, based on that teaching from Jesus that you heard read from Matthew chapter 7. What I want to try to do in the few minutes that we have here is to help you consider maybe another way of thinking about this metaphor that Jesus uses to make a particular point as he's teaching His disciples. And that's maybe maybe the first thing that's useful to say is that Jesus uses a lot of figurative language when he's teaching His disciples. And it's not so much that we mistake it for literal language, but we do kind of get caught up in the specific allegorical

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meaning of it, right, and maybe we should step back and try to get the broader point sometimes, that's what I'm going to try to do here.

Specifically, rather than thinking about whether you are a wise person or a foolish person, whether you're a wise builder or a foolish builder, I'd like to ask you to consider what your foundation is. What is the thing, or things, that you have constructed your religious experience and belief on? Is it good behavior? The ironic thing for me growing up, and I don't blame anybody but myself for this, but, the ironic thing for me was that I was at the same time believing two things: one that I couldn't do anything to earn my salvation, and two, that I had better work real hard to be holy. That I couldn't... nothing I did was going to make any difference, except that I really better be sure that I'm not, you know, smoking, or drinking, or having premarital relations, or, you know, the the list of things, probably, right. Maybe that's your foundation. Maybe you come from a more, kind of, high church tradition and you have, like, a list of creeds or confessions from your church past, you know, some of them several pages long and very detailed, maybe that's the thing that you've had your foundation on. Maybe a particular view of God and God's nature is the thing that you've built your spiritual house on.

Here's what I want to do, I want to take a closer look at what Jesus actually said in this teaching in Matthew 7. Because we always remember the part about the foolish man who built his house on the sand, the rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house and it fell. And great was its fall. By the way, do you guys know the song that goes along with that? Any Sunday school people? [singing] "The wise man built his house upon the rock", but we... skip that part that's not the fun part. The fun part is [singing] "the foolish man built his house upon the sand, and the rains came down, and the floods came up, and the foolish man's house fell flat and you are supposed to clap really loud [laughter] as if to intimidate all the people who are experiencing deconstruction around you in 2nd grade Sunday school [laughter]. We all know that part, if not because of the song then because it's the dramatic point of the story, of the imagery, right.

But, let's look at what comes right before it: "everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like the foolish man who built his house upon sand." In the more, like, direct linear translations of the Bible, like, something like the King James Version, or if you go and read an interlinear Greek and English version of it, Jesus says: "I will liken that one to a person who built their house on sand." But, it's very much a simile here. And of course, this part that you see on the screen, "that everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man," that's the counterpart of the first part of the teaching.

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Why don't we go back to the first part of the teaching, which is that "everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock." I don't think I put that one on the screen, I'm not sure why. "The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall because it had been founded on rock." This is a crucial point, I think, and I hope this isn't putting too fine a point on the language here, but I think it sometimes gets missed when we think about this. The difference between a foundation, which in building practice is something that a person does, and the rock or the sand, whatever surface it might be that the foundation is laid on. And it's easy to allow this, I think rather direct teaching of Jesus, to become squishy and to morph into a different meaning for us, in particular those of us whose church background is in a certain section of the Christian world. It's easy to make this teaching morph into something that sounds a little bit like, "anybody who accepts Jesus into their heart is wise and anybody who doesn't accept Jesus into their heart is a fool and the fool's house is going to get flattened."

But, that's not what Jesus said. First of all, Jesus never said, "accept me into your heart." Founded on rock. The concrete blocks, big stones, bricks, they might seem sturdy, they might seem like enough, but those pieces of foundation that you -- as a human being, as you're building something -- lay out, they're only as structurally sound as what they're placed on. And if you're placing it on a particular understanding of salvation, I actually think that's the wrong surface to build your spiritual house on. I actually think that many of the, maybe entirely good things, that we come to believe as people who grow up in the church -- or maybe you didn't grow up in the church, maybe you came to it later in life -- many of the things that might be entirely good to believe are nonetheless not suitable as a surface to build our foundation. In other words, all this doctrinal stuff is ultimately not rock, but sand.

There's another version of this teaching in Luke chapter 6 and it's a little bit different. A little Bible study tip for you: look for the different versions of the same story and see the different versions, different details. That can be really interesting to see. In Luke 6, Jesus said "someone who comes to me, hears my words, and acts on them is like a man building a house who dug deeply."

That's the difference, that's the different part: he describes how the man dug deeply and laid the foundation on the rock. And I wonder if your faith fell apart -- I wonder if my faith when it did -- fell apart because we stopped digging too soon, we started pouring concrete before we found the actual rock. Because, when you base everything on the particular doctrines you believe, of course the whole thing is going to fall apart when one of them gets credibly challenged. Now, you could be forgiven for making that mistake, after all, the church does a really good job of telling us that you're saved by what? Faith, you're saved by faith. Actually the

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church doesn't tell us that, Paul tells us that in the Bible. But, of course, it matters how you define faith. What the church has told us many times is that you're saved by believing the right thing, or things. In fact, they usually provide a very helpful list -- it might vary from church to church -- here's our list, how many of these can you check off? You need to get all of them in order to avoid hell.

And so, being saved by faith sometimes makes this ugly transition into being saved by what you can manage to convince yourself on a given day. And that's when it becomes entirely unsustainable and incredibly painful. And that's when you slip into deconstruction. But that is the very definition of building your house on sand. The good news, and I think it is The Good News is that: there is always rock under the sand. And so, if the storms have raged in your life, if the rain has come down, and the floods have come up, and the sand has slipped away, and your house is beginning to shift, and you are worried, not only that you might be considered a fool, but that there might be no hope for you, no place for you to live spiritually speaking, I want to encourage you to find some hope in this parable. Not dismay, but hope. If you'll allow me to do a little midrash with it: the sand is just stuff that's in the way of the rock. The sand is not the final answer. It's sort of like...it seems like that's what Jesus is saying, I think he's warning us about something, I don't think he intends us to think that there's no hope if we've started out in the wrong place or on the wrong surface.

So, let me give some examples that might have been things that sort of made you feel like the sand was washing away from under your house. If you came to accept the scientific teaching about human origins, you know, if you, I don't like to say believe in evolution, because I think it's the wrong verb, but let's just say it for now, and you feel like that's in conflict with how the Bible describes the world, that's sand. I'm telling you it's sand, just dig a little deeper and find the rock. If you came to believe, because you studied geology, that the entire globe was not flooded, ever, and if you feel like that's contradictory to the claim of plain teaching of the Bible: it's sand, keep digging and find the rock. If you can't believe in the miracles all the time, if the virgin birth, or even the literal resurrection seems like that's just a bridge too far, that is, well it might not be sand, but it might be part of the foundation that you've built up. It's not the rock, is my point. Keep digging and find the rock. Because, even the sturdiest, truest, most well-built foundation cannot stand up to the storm if it's not laid on the rock. Keep digging away that sand until you find the rock. Do you see how there is some hope in these visual metaphors, not just dismay? For those of us who feel like the house is washing away, dig deeper and find the rock. And the Rock is Jesus. It's not what you believe that's going to stand up to the storms, it's the one you believe in, and, specifically, if we look at what he's actually teaching us, it's obedience to Him.

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How does this passage end? We've been talking about the images of the house in the sand and the rock, but, what it ends with is, "when Jesus had finished saying these things..." I actually want to get it exactly right for you, so just bear with me while I find the page. "When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching for he taught them as one having authority and not as their scribes." Now, the teaching that they're astounded by, is it just this house on the rock/house on the sand thing? I don't think it is. The end of Matthew 7 is not just the end of a chapter of the Bible, it's the end of the Sermon on the Mount, which goes back and starts at the beginning of Matthew chapter 5. And so when it says that the crowds were astounded at his teaching, I fully believe that what they're astounded at is all of the things he said in Matthew 5, Matthew 6, and Matthew 7. And when he gets to the very end of that teaching is when he says, "those who hear these words of mine and act on them are like the wise ones who build their house on rock."

I'm not telling you that figuring out what creation looks like and how evolution works on it is unimportant. I'm not telling you that geology is, you know, you shouldn't study it, or it's going to ruin your faith in the Bible. I'm not telling you that you need to give up on the Bible because the geology makes it look not correct. I'm not telling you that the birth of Jesus to the Virgin Mary isn't an important thing for you to wrestle with and grapple with. I'm not telling you that you don't need to believe Jesus was raised from the dead, or that any of those things don't matter. What I am telling you is that those are not the rock. The rock is Jesus and what he taught us to do.

And here is my pro-tip for those of you who just cannot manage to force yourself to believe in something that seems silly or supernatural: obey Jesus. Don't worry about all that stuff, just do what Jesus tells us to do. Stop trying so hard to force yourself to believe in the virgin birth and instead start working on what it looks like to actually love your neighbor. Stop trying to figure out from historical records whether the Israelites actually conquered the Canaanites and whether those civilizations mapped out exactly the way they look like in the Bible, and instead, think about what it looks like to love *your* enemies, right now. I'm telling you this is the antidote to doubt, for me it was. It may be the wrong word, antidote, there's no cure, doubt is a chronic condition. I just need to tell you right now, there is no cure for that, you're probably going to have it for the rest of your life, but it's not fatal, it's not a terminal diagnosis. And in those moments when you cannot bring yourself to believe, what I want you to do is look at what Jesus says in Matthew 7: "I just want you to obey." And for some of you that may look like at least for a time I can't believe in all that supernatural stuff but what Jesus taught is big enough and powerful enough to change and save the world and I'm going to get busy trying to do it. The reason why I think that's a suitable antidote for your doubt is because, at least in my case, it was only after I started doing that, that the beliefs started to seep back into me and it started



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to feel like I could say the Creed again and I wasn't lying. Because acting as if you believe is the best way I know to start believing. I would go so far as to say that acting as if you believe is the only useful definition of faith that we have.

I want you to take that piece of paper that says faith equals and then a list of things that you have to believe and I want you to rip it in half and fold it over, and rip it in half again and fold it over, and rip it in half again and throw it into the fire. What I want you to put in its place is a willingness to step out and act and do something that Jesus said to do. I'm not making this up, this is not some postmodern nonsense that a pastor came up with to avoid having to talk about virgin birth and resurrection. Listen, I believe in those things. This is how faith is defined in the Bible, from the beginning of the story, the narrative tale of God's work with God's people this is how faith is defined. Abraham is commended in the Christian scriptures as having a great faith, which was credited to him as righteousness -- you're saved by your faith -- but how is his faith exemplified in the actual story where Abraham appears in Genesis chapter 12? God tells him to go and he goes. God doesn't even tell him where to go, he just says, "ok, I'm going." That is faith. Action is the proof of your faith.

I didn't write a good ending to this sermon. This feels very dangerous to me. Does it feel at all dangerous to you? It feels very scary to me to be saying to you, a group of people who I ostensibly have the responsibility to shepherd into faith in Christ, to save you for all eternity, what exactly is and isn't the most important thing for you to believe and do. That's terrifying. And, for those of you who are just wrestling with this for the first time, who are saying, "what?! You're saying that it's not necessarily about the list of things that I believe? I'm not saved by believing the right things?" That's terrifying for you too. That part isn't scary for me because that was several years ago for me in my story, but this right here, saying this in these stark terms, raising my voice way more than I ever do when I'm preaching, this is very serious eternal stuff.

But, I believe it with all of my heart. The only reason that I'm brave enough to get up and say these things to you in this way: this is the story that God has written on my life. I guess that's the end of the sermon. James 1:21: "welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls." What is the Word of God? Yes it's the Bible, but the capital W "Word of God" is Jesus. "Welcome with meekness the implanted Word." May Jesus be implanted in you so that you have the power to have your souls saved. But... "but, be doers of the word, not merely hearers because those who are only hearing the word and not doing it are deceiving themselves."

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Let's pray together. God, I lift to you all of these beloved children of yours, some of whom feel perfectly fine today, some who are deeply suffering, some who are assured of their faith, and some who are confused, and everybody in between. Will you bathe all of us in the warmth of your love and embrace. Help us to accept the goodness of your grace powered by a love which is so much deeper, so much wider, so much taller than we could ever imagine. Love covers a multitude of sins, may it cover ours. Give us the courage and boldness to be doers of your word, to obey Jesus. And Lord I pray, it may be months or years down the road, but I pray for those who step out in faith in this way, that the belief side of things would return to them as well, that there would be a reconstructed experience to be had, that there would be a new orientation toward the world and toward you. I pray these things in Christ's name, Amen.

We're going to sing a couple of songs together and take communion together. Artisan's table is open to all who are seeking to follow Jesus. Please don't stay out of this meal because you're not a member here or it's your first time here. If you want to be with Jesus, if you are following Jesus, if you want to obey him and have the strength to do it, please come to this table and remember his sacrifice, his broken body, his shed blood, may it be for you the real presence of the Savior. May it be an act of unity with each other, with Christians all around the world, all throughout time, who have partaken of this sacrament. And may it be food for your hungry souls, for your weary spiritual selves. Jesus offers you the sustenance, it's yours if you want it. If you need prayer this morning, there's a member of the prayer team at the back room who would be happy to pray with you during this time. And for the first time in many months, it's my joy to say to you, you can go back and get your kids if they're in our children's programming today. Let's continue to worship God in song and sacrament and prayer. Amen.

[End of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information, visit us at [ArtisanChurch.com](https://www.ArtisanChurch.com).