

Persecution in the Church

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Date: 09 September 2020

Preacher: Tom Holland

[0 : 00] Jesus. Lee wrote me this morning, kind of late morning, to tell me of the situation.

and said, would you have something ready just in case? And so I cheated a little bit and went into my Bible study files and pulled one out.

And it's going to sound a little weird as you read along because if I don't correct it, I talk about, well, this morning, well, I gave this one morning at Voice of the Martyrs.

I make a reference to Tom. Tom was Tom White, the late director he passed on. And so there's things in there that probably won't make much sense, but that's the purpose for that.

I didn't want anyone to lay awake tonight wondering why did he do that? I'm a great fan of Dr. Luke, a great physician and a great historian.

[1 : 05] He was a first-rate historian. I'm sure a good physician, traveled with Paul. This is what he has to say in the book of Acts, chapter 8. A very pivotal chapter for the church.

And on that day, a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem. And they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria except the apostles.

Some devout men buried Stephen and made loud lamentation over him. But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house and dragging off men and women.

He would put them in prison. Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the word. Philip went down to the city of Samaria and began proclaiming Christ to them.

The crowds with one accord were giving attention to what was said by Philip as they heard and saw the signs which he was performing.

[2 : 13] For in the case of many who had unclean spirits, they were coming out of them shouting with a loud voice. And many who had been paralyzed and lame were healed. So there was much rejoicing in that city.

I titled this devotion back when I gave it in 2012, I believe, The Power of Persecution. Of course, I'm giving it to the Voice of the Martyrs, which they minister to the persecuted church.

And the world, and by that I mean the church world, for the most part, does not link the word power with the word persecution.

In fact, most Christians in America view persecution as something bad, something caused by a lack of faith, and something that was avoidable.

Of course, the remedy of avoiding persecution in the West is just merely get along with the surrounding culture. But the church hasn't been called to be tolerant.

[3 : 29] The church has been called to be faithful through the Lord Jesus Christ. And we have here quite a contrast between today's church and the church of the first century recorded by Dr. Luke.

Our passage that I read this evening begins on that day. Well, just what day is being spoken of it is the day that Stephen was martyred, killed for his faith.

On the day of Stephen's horrendous murder, a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem.

A Hellenist Jew led that persecution. His name was Saul of Tarsus. Saul hated the church. He wanted to eradicate the church from earth and thought he was doing God a favor.

Of course, the Saul spoken of here later became the great Apostle Paul. It is no small irony that Paul would suffer far more for the cause of Christ than did Stephen.

[4 : 58] Stephen was killed outright and went straight to glory. Paul was battered repeatedly until he too was ultimately killed by Caesar in Rome.

And this was in keeping with the declaration of Christ who said, I will show him how much he must suffer for my name's sake.

Stephen's death is the catalyst for the storm of persecution that broke out against the church. And I mean on that day.

That's when it started. They went out like wild animals looking for the church, looking for Christians. The words of Christ were coming true.

John 15, if they persecuted me, they will persecute you. John 16, they will make you outcasts from the synagogue, but an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God.

[6:19] It's amazing. And I can assure you that there are believers in this world that died today because they would not deny Christ.

That happens every day, seven days a week. We used to estimate one about every three and a half minutes, but we came to the realization we really couldn't substantiate that.

But that's what we've been told by people in those countries. Something amazing happened on the heels of this great persecution.

Within days or even hours, the believers were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria. The scriptures tell us that the apostles remained in Jerusalem.

Many of the other believers were scattered. They were scattered. A storm had fallen on the church.

[7:28] Remember, the church isn't that old. They're not that old. You know, it's no small irony when the church was born, John and Peter ended up in jail within 12 hours.

Didn't take them long. But the storm fell and Saul began ravaging the church. Having received authority from the religious leaders of Israel, Saul arrested and hauled to prison the men and women of faith in Jerusalem.

He did this by entering their houses and dragging them away. The word ravaging used there is quite instructive. It is the only place it appears in the New Testament.

It means to destroy, ruin, or damage. In the history books written in Greek, it was used to describe the destruction of an entire city or a region.

To ravage was very destructive. Saul set out to literally tear the church apart and was happy to do so thinking that he was doing God a favor.

[8:52] In fact, he was so destructive I don't think Paul ever forgave himself in this life. He killed Christians.

He supervised the killing of Christians. Some writers have suggested since he held the coats of those that were stoning Stephen, he was probably in charge of that execution.

I don't think he ever forgave himself. This is why we see Paul throughout the New Testament many times describing himself as he who is unworthy to be an apostle or he who is the least of the apostles.

And I think that's Paul telling us I'm not worthy. I was killing believers. So to summarize to this point we have Stephen he's often referred to as the first Christian martyr.

I tend to think Jesus came before him. But anyway we have Stephen and he's dead. He's gone.

[10:06] He was stoned to death by an angry mob because they he had the audacity to preach the gospel of Christ to them.

He preached Jesus to them. We have Saul of Tarsus ravaging the church going door to door arresting believers and throwing them into prison.

And I personally think it doesn't take much of an imagination to come to the conclusion that those arrested faced a very hard life in confinement or in probability death at the hands of the religious leaders.

This was the great persecution spoken of earlier and it started that very day. That's when it started. Now what was the result of this persecution?

It is what I refer to as the power. of persecution. Kind of an oxymoron. Those seem to be opposites. Persecution, power, good things come out of persecution.

[11:21] It sounds strange. The first result was the church was scattered. Well, isn't that a bad thing?

Well, let's look at it. The church was scattered. the church had become practically landlocked in Jerusalem.

They were there. This is at variance with the parting words of the Lord as He ascended back into heaven from whence He came, Acts chapter 1, verses 6 to 8.

So when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, Lord, is it at this time you are restoring the kingdom to Israel?

He said to them, it is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority, but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and that was going to happen in the next chapter, and you shall be my witnesses.

[12:31] Now, listen to this. You're going to be my witnesses both in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest parts of the earth.

I mean, there were places on earth that hadn't been discovered, like the western hemisphere, for instance, where we live. On the day and the hour of Stephen's martyrdom, the winds of persecution blew, and the church was scattered.

The church began her long journey to the remotest parts of the earth. And guess what? We're here in the 21st century.

That journey continues to this very hour. That's still going on, traceable back to what happened in Jerusalem that first hour.

the journey continues, and we're witnesses to that. And some of us have been participants in that. Every time I've gone out into the world, everywhere I go, I find believers.

[13:49] The VOM guys, you find believers. I was on an elevator in Beijing, and this guy had on a dove on his lapel, a Chinese man, couldn't speak English.

My Chinese is limited to ni hao, means hello, that's it. I know more Delaware than I know Chinese, and I don't know any Delaware. And he saw me looking at it, and we communicated.

He started smiling, he said, you? I said, yeah, you. I mean, we communicated. Everywhere I have gone in the world, I have found believers.

Todd Nettleton, maybe a name you remember, his wife's been on our prayer list for a long time, I think we finally took her off. Todd's the voice of the voice of the martyrs. He does VOM radio. Good friend.

He flew to one of the stands, Turkmenistan. He lands, he flew for like 30 hours. He lands, he gets in a car or a little, like a land cruiser, and they start north, and they drove on dirt roads full of holes for 16 hours.

[14:58] He just flew in 30 hours, drove 16 hours, he interviewed one guy, drove back 16 hours, got on a plane, and flew back. But it was a dynamic interview, very important.

But he met believers along the way. Couldn't speak their language, but there was this link-up. We had lunch in Hong Kong, Tom White and I.

I'll call the guy's name, John. He's quite a guy. And John said to me that day words that continue to reverberate.

He said, the gospel is so powerful, it will find a way to penetrate the darkest areas of the world. world. And that's true. That's true.

Everywhere you go. God used persecution to sovereignly scatter his church.

[16:05] To me, it's no different in our day. A few years ago, in one of the large metropolitan areas of China, the authorities discovered an underground church that met every Sunday with 500 members.

It's kind of hard to meet with 500 folk and, you know, clandestinely. So they descended on this church. We actually have some photographs of that which we published.

And they made a declaration. They went up to the pulpit and announced in Chinese, of course, you can no longer meet. New law that no church can have over five members.

Well, next Sunday, by the sovereignty of God, 100 new churches were born. Now, instead of having one church of 500, they had 100 churches of five.

And it kept growing and it kept growing and it kept growing. the pastor there, I haven't met him, but the VOM guys have, he stood behind his pulpit and there was a small little handbag, suitcase here.

[17:25] It was toothbrush, toothpaste, change of underwear, if they arrested him. His wife wanted to be ready, had a change of clothes. I mean, that's how certain he was.

We had a guy speak here a few years ago from China and before he got up there, I asked him, I said, have you ever been arrested for your faith? He said, not yet. He knows they were coming. I was asked that myself one time and I won't tell you the answer right now. Anyway, but as the church scattered, look what happened.

Pretty interesting. in Acts chapter 8, starting in verse 4, therefore those who had been scattered went about preaching the word.

Chew on that a little bit. That's amazing. Those who had been scattered went about preaching the word.

[18 : 32] Did God know what he was doing? I mean, some of those people said, man, have we hooked our wagon to the wrong star here? I mean, we're being persecuted, we're being scattered.

No, God knew what he was doing. Philip went down to the city of Samaria and began proclaiming Christ to them.

The crowds with one accord were giving attention to what was said by Philip. As they heard and saw the signs which he was performing, remember, this is the apostolic days.

Those have changed a lot of them in our day. For in the case of many who had unclean spirits, they were coming out of them shouting with a loud voice. And many who had been paralyzed and lame were healed.

I won't mention names, but I'm always amazed at guys like Benny Hinn who claim he's got this gift of apostolic king. The apostles walked down the street and their shadows fell on guys and they were healed.

[19 : 39] Well, that's not happening in our day. But let's look at the power of persecution. When it came to the church in Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the church was scattered.

All kinds of churches started. And that becomes pivotal because you remember later when the church in Jerusalem was so persecuted and they ran out of money.

They lost their jobs. They couldn't get work. They couldn't buy food. They were destitute. Now, the church in Jerusalem was an arrogant church.

They thought the Jewish Christians were a notch above everybody else and now all of a sudden have no money, no jobs, no income, no ability to buy food.

And guess what? Some guys showed up with bags of money from the churches in the Gentile areas that heard about their plight and took up collections.

[20 : 44] And these were poor people. And that's the day Jerusalem church woke up. And said, we are one body. We are one body. They really bailed them out.

But the church was scattered. What happens when the church is scattered? The word of God was preached. It's starting to go through the Roman empire.

And you know, we see evidence of that, of course, in the book of Revelation. Chapters 2 and 3, the seven churches, which are in, they say Asia Minor, that's modern day Turkey.

I've been to some of those churches, the ones that are still there. Scattered, the word of God preached, Christ proclaimed, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Multitudes, Gentiles and Jews, heard the gospel. People were physically healed, but more importantly, they were spiritually healed.

[21 : 46] they were born again, born from above. Satan's persecution, and that's where it comes from, promoted the very thing it was designed to destroy.

It was promoting it. He wanted to destroy it. It's sort of like Satan, you know, the last place Satan wanted Jesus was on the cross. And after he went to the cross, the last thing Satan wanted is come out of the tomb.

He died on the cross, keep him in the tomb. Every time Satan has a plan, God's got other ideas. This persecution infused the believers with zeal to proclaim the gospel in new areas where it had never been proclaimed before.

Philip went to work evangelizing. And it's interesting to note, Philip is the only man in the Bible given the title evangelist.

He's the only one referred to as an evangelist. That is a fitting honor in light of his pioneering work in the spreading of the gospel. There are other evangelists, but they call him one.

[23 : 12] Now, Philip went as far as Samaria, a distance of about 40 miles north of Jerusalem, for the purpose of proclamation. You've got to remember Samaria.

They were half-breeds, half-Jews, half-Gentiles. Now, you know what that meant to the Jews? They're not Jewish. And they hated Samaritans.

That's why when Jesus told his disciples, I must go through Samaria, they said, why? We don't go through Samaria, and especially a rabbi, you'll be unclean.

And then they go to town to get some food and water, or some food anyway, they come back, and what's he doing? He's talking to a woman. Jewish rabbis didn't do that, and especially a Samaritan woman in the village of Sychar.

Remember all that? And he revealed to her that he was the Messiah? First time he had overtly revealed that. He chose a Samaritan woman.

[24 : 19] Isn't that amazing? I love the way God does that. So, Philip goes as far as Samaria. The Holy Spirit had gone in advance, and the result was multitudes were saved.

Multitudes were saved. You mean God can even save Samaritans? Yeah. Yeah. You can read that next sentence for what it's worth.

We at VOM, we should constantly praise the Spirit of Christ as he goes into the persecuted countries before we even arrive. He's gone before us.

He's already done the work. I gave out, Diane knows this story well because she was home praying for us. We were in North Vietnam, Hanoi.

took 140 pounds of Bibles and Christian literature and even song books.

[25 : 25] I didn't have any need for the song books. First of all, they were in the Hmong language, H-M-O-N-G, and I don't sing very well. But we took 140 pounds of this, and so we went down these streets in Hanoi being followed by the secret police.

We turned corners and we finally came to a little room and we went inside. It wasn't near as big as this room, half as big. Totally dark.

No windows. Solid door we shut. and we stood there and you could sense there were some eyes staring our way, but we couldn't see them, they couldn't see us.

Finally, there was one light bulb and someone turned on one light bulb and there were 23 Hmong pastors in that room and one woman who had traveled with her husband because she was really sick and she came with her husband.

these guys had heard a rumor that Christians from America are going to bring us Bibles and on the strength of that they rode trains for hours, like 20 hours to that area and then waited in that room to see if anybody showed up.

[27 : 04] They had no guarantee we were coming. It was a rumor, only a rumor. And we showed up and the sad part is we could only spend 20 minutes in there for fear that if the authorities caught us with them, their punishment, we'd probably get deported, but they would really be punished.

and so they had me pray and we had a translator and then we all hugged and then we all left. I'd love to spend the week with them and then they returned home.

It's amazing. It's amazing. the Holy Spirit had gone in advance. And he does that with our VOM workers as well.

There was another product of the terrible persecution that occurred that day. And what a product because we read in verse 8, and there was much rejoicing in that city.

They're being persecuted. How can you rejoice when you're being persecuted? You were found worthy to suffer for the name of Christ.

[28 : 17] I mean, we get persecuted, what's our first reaction? I'm going to get me a good lawyer. Or we're going to go outside behind the barn door and we'll settle this like men.

No. They rejoiced. The early church father Tertullian, I'll let Mike read that in Latin, but here's the translation. The devil is God's monkey.

He just plays. God's got him on a string. Rejoicing was the furthest thing from Satan's mind as he orchestrated the great persecution.

Furthest thing from his mind. Far from destroying the church. He was an instrument in the hands of God to spread the gospel to save unbelievers, to heal, to energize the first missionary, and all this led to a rejoicing directed at the true God.

And all this still goes on. We had Hmong brothers in prison over there for preaching the gospel, and one of them served his sentence. the authorities came to release him. He says, can I stay six more months?

[29 : 35] They said, well, your sentence is up. He said, I need six more months to get, I've only witnessed half the people in prison. They didn't know what witness meant, so they said, well, we'll give you another six months if you want to stay.

So he stayed and witnessed to the rest of the people there. In the days after preparing this devotion, something kept rolling around in my head, I was looking for a great passage.

I wanted to come up with a fitting end at the devotions at VOM. And in Genesis chapter 50, Joseph, you remember he was the persecuted son of Jacob, persecuted by his own flesh and blood brothers, sold into slavery by his brothers.

And this is what Joseph said, do not be afraid. He's now revealed himself to his brothers. I'm your brother Joseph. Their hearts skipped a beat. They sold him into slavery.

He's now the second most powerful person in Egypt, second only to Pharaoh. What is he going to do to us? Do not be afraid for I'm in God's place. God put him there.

[30 : 54] As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good. in order to bring about this present result to preserve many people alive.

Remember, he saved the nation of Israel. They were destitute. Drought, famine, no food, no ability to buy food. His father, Jacob, brought the 70 members of the surviving members of the tribe of Israel into Egypt.

They lived there 430 years. They end up in slavery, but that Pharaoh blessed and Jacob blessed him. Remember, laid hands on him and blessed him. In the Old Testament, there was power in persecution.

In the first century, there was power in persecution, and that power of God in and through persecution has not diminished in the 21st century.

I added this for tonight. We used to say, you know, and we've said it in here, one of these days persecution is going to come to America. Let me tell you something, folks, it's here.

[32 : 07] It's here. And it's going to get worse. It's going to get very bad. At VOM, we now see as one of our many ministries preparing Americans for what's coming.

Getting the church in America ready because we've got so many life lessons from churches throughout Asia and Africa and other parts of the world.

But it's here. And it's going to intensify the closer we get to the return of Christ, which I tend to believe is very near. John said this is the last hour and he said that 2,000 years ago.

I wonder if these are the last seconds. Let's hold with prayer. Thank you, Father, for your grace, your mercy, and the peace we have with and through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Lord, may we remember that persecution is in your tool chest. you use it to spread your gospel. And we thank you for that in Jesus' name.

[33 : 21] Be with all these that were mentioned tonight. We pray for them in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.