

Paul Dunbar – In the Midst Of Persecution
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Preached On: Sunday, November 21, 2021

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Crossroads Baptist Church, how are we doing this morning? Brother, thank you, sir, I know you've done a wonderful work here and I'm humbled to get to follow you, talented in the sense that he can lead worship and preach God's word whereas if I were to come, I can only preach. I have zero ability to sing but I give it my best effort and I am thankful that Christ is coming back.

We talked this morning at First Baptist about how when you look towards the end times, it's going to get pretty grotesque but thankfully we, as a body of believers in Christ, are going to get called home before all that mess happens and we are thankful for things that happened in the past, we're thankful for things in the present, but sometimes we forget to be grateful for what's coming in the future and that's Christ on that white horse. And I don't know about you, but I get anxious to get up here and share but I've titled today's message "In the Midst of Persecution." In the midst of persecution. I just want to preface it with two statements. 1. If you are under some type of persecution, that means you're living the way God wants you to live. You're speaking what God wants you to speak. And if you're not under persecution, there's one of two things: either you don't know Christ or you're not living the way God wants you to live. And so we're going to dive into Acts 8 and we're going to be in verses 4 through 13, maybe hit verse 25, we'll see where the Spirit leads us. Brother Tom did forewarn me, he said I have until the evening service tonight so I'm excited, I can go for a while here. But if you have your Bibles, turn to Acts 8. We're going to start in verse 4 and just read this account of the transition of the gospel from Jerusalem into all of God's people, to all the nations. This is how it started and it started because of persecution, it started because people didn't like truth, it started because the message of hope that Jesus Christ brought for us.

So if you have your Bibles, turn to Acts 8. We're going to read verses 4 through 13. It says,

4 Therefore they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word. 5 Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria, and preached Christ unto them. 6 And the people with one accord gave heed unto those things which Philip spake, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did. 7 For unclean spirits, crying with loud voice, came out of many that were possessed with them: and many taken with palsies, and that were lame, were healed. 8 [I love it,] And there was great joy in that city. 9 But there

was a certain man, called Simon, which beforetime in the same city used sorcery, and bewitched the people of Samaria, giving out that himself was some great one: 10 To whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, This man is the great power of God. 11 And to him they had regard, because that of long time he had bewitched them with sorceries. 12 But when they believed Philip preaching the things concerning the kingdom of God, and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. 13 Then Simon himself believed also: and when he was baptized, he continued with Philip, and wondered, beholding the miracles and signs which were done.

Would you pray with me?

God, we love you. God, may your word be spoken. May your truth be preached, God, that we would leave this place convicted to live, to speak and preach the gospel of Jesus, that which brings hope to all of humanity which receive what Christ has done on the cross. We love you. Be with us today. In Jesus' name. Amen.

We're going to dive into this word "persecution" a little bit. We're going to talk about what it means to be persecuted and what happens when we follow God's plan and allow the Spirit to work in our life by preaching the gospel. So before we do anything, let's look at this text. We have Pentecost, which happened early in Acts, and we see the Holy Spirit comes down as a testament to the power of God on the Jewish people. They received the Holy Spirit and they're doing well, they're thriving, people are coming to put their faith in the Way and then as we get closer to the book, chapter 8, persecution starts coming. They are causing such a storm that people don't like it.

Saul, we all know Saul, is the leader. He's Jewish. He's smart. He understands the Jewish traditions. He doesn't like it and he comes forth and is leading the charge against the Jewish people. Then as the book, chapter 7 ends, we see Stephen and he's martyred. He's the first recorded martyr for the faith. He lived so on fire for the gospel of Jesus that he died so that his name would be made known. And we jump into chapter 8 and in verses 1 through 4 we see what happened. Saul is pushing them out and it takes God sometimes pushing us out of our comfort zone to go and do what he's told us to do. They knew. Jesus said, "Go unto all the nations and make disciples." They knew their plan and their mission just like you and I know but sometimes we get comfortable.

So God uses persecution to proclaim his name. Let me say that again: he uses persecution to proclaim his name. And Philip goes down but we see if you didn't hear it, they went preaching. Those that believed in Christ, those that were scattered, obviously the apostles stayed, it tells us that in the text, but those that went out, they were scattered, they were dispersed, they were stretched, they went preaching. It wasn't to find safe haven in another city, it wasn't to just start doing whatever trade that they had learned as a child, they went preaching the gospel. And he comes to a place called Samaria and we're going to look at this idea of Samaritans here in a minute but I want you to understand that the gospel was stuck in Jerusalem. God said, "This message of hope is for all nations, for all

people." But Jesus had been raised from the dead, they were teaching and preaching to Jewish people but they were stuck, they were comfortable just like us, and God used this idea of persecution to get them to scatter.

But let's look at this word "persecution." It's defined as "to pursue; to prosecute; to persecute," but also "to pursue in a good sense; to prosecute, persecute and pursue with repeated acts of enmity." Now I'm not real smart. I'm a kid's pastor. I was a college football player so I had to do another definition. I had to look up this word "enmity." Enmity, I had to even play it on Google so I would hopefully say it correctly, and it says this, enmity means "the state or feeling of being actively opposed or hostile to someone or something." And I thought, "Ah, people can relate to that." When you're living for the gospel, when you are loving those that don't love you, when you are speaking truth in a world that wants to pervert the truth and distort the truth, people are going to come down on you. People are not going to like you but that's okay because that's what we've been called to do.

Some people are not going to like what you have to say. We live in a society that is countercultural to what the Bible teaches. I mean, I have four daughters and I pray earnestly for them that they understand that their beauty and their purpose and their worth is not defined by what they see on tv, is not defined by what they see on the TikTok or Facebook or social media or anything around them, that they are defined by God who loves them and created them. But that's not the truth that they're taught. That's not the truth that we are being taught. If you like something, you should do it. If something satisfies you, you should do it. If you want to dress a certain way, you should do it. If you want to identify as a certain thing, go ahead. Unfortunately, for those of us that identify with Auburn football, it is a hard time to walk that road but do you know what? We're going to stick with it but understand this: persecution is coming, especially as the world just clearly projects this message of you, selfishness, whatever you want to do, and we as believers in Christ have to understand that we not only, one, have to live differently but we have to speak differently, and we, it's our job to share this gospel message of hope.

The early apostles and disciples were being persecuted because of the message that they were living and telling people about. This message is called the good news. We know it as the gospel of Jesus Christ, that he came through the virgin, he lived a perfect and sinless life, and for 3 ½ years he preached that he is the fulfillment of God's plan, and for those that put their faith, hope and trust in him, would be saved, would be redeemed. And we have to look at this idea and understand that if you follow Christ, you're going to be hated. Matthew 10:22 says this, tells us that we will be hated for his name's sake. If you live for Christ, you're going to be hated. If you live for Christ, you're going to be hated.

I know that they say today's generation is a lot worse off than 25 or 30 years ago and I agree with that statement because we have technology where it can be pushed down in your face. I mean, you can't even watch tv without just going, "Really? I mean, really? I saw a jewelry commercial and this is what we have to get on the tv?" But do you know what? We're going to stand true to God's word and we're going to preach this message of hope.

So as we look at this principle of the midst of persecution, what do we have to understand about the gospel because that's the key source in this whole passage, is it's the gospel that transformed, it's the gospel that caused the persecution, it's the gospel that caused change in the city of Samaria. So how do we as believers understand what the gospel does? And the first thing that I want you to understand is what does the gospel do? What does the gospel do? The gospel is going to bring persecution. In verses 1 through 4 we see that. They were teaching and preaching, Saul didn't like it, he said, "You know what? We're gonna take them out. We're gonna wear them out." And I love how God takes, I mean, the absolute worst in the New Testament, flips his heart and he becomes the greatest missionary to ever walk the face of the earth. I mean, is God not so good as to take what is terrible, awful, just like us, and when he radically transforms our heart he makes it about him and his glory?

But the gospel brings persecution. They were living out their faith, they would not stop preaching, they would not stop teaching, and for that they were persecuted and I want to encourage you, brothers and sisters, that persecution is only going to get worse. But we have hope and we can be thankful and grateful. Why? Because Christ is coming. He's going to call us home. But if you're sitting there today and you're like, "You know what? I don't know if I have Jesus." Then you have every right to be highly concerned. You have every reason to be concerned.

Paul teaches us that persecution will cause problems. Why? Here's three things why the gospel brings persecution. People do not like what the gospel stands for. The gospel stands for hope, it stands for comfort, it stands for trust, it stands for love and the world is not about that, not biblical love, not biblical truth, and that's the second point about the gospel is that people do not like the truth. We live in a society where it says you can create your own truth but we as believers stand on this truth. And some people say, "Man, it's getting harder to live." Is it? I mean, they're making it abundantly clear that this is the truth whereas we have God's word so we just have to step out in faith and do what God says but we have to spend some time in God's word to understand what his truth says. That's the second thing and the third thing is naturally as sinful people, because of the blood sin disease from Adam passed down to generation and generation and generation, we have this innate desire to wake up every day and be selfish, and every day to serve ourselves. Lost people are acting how they're supposed to act. It's us that are acting different because of the Holy Spirit that lives inside of us.

So understand that the gospel will bring persecution. We learn in Acts 8, we see it, we see it in 7, we see it in 8, but if you stay faithful and true, what happens? This message of hope explodes. We have it today because of these early believers that were unashamed of the gospel. So if you're ready to be persecuted, if you would like more persecution in your life, and doesn't that sound crazy? But you should leave this place going, "You know what, God? For you I'm gonna preach Jesus. For that person that's mean to me at the grocery store, I'm gonna pray for them."

So I want to encourage you, know that persecution is coming. That's the first thing that the gospel does. When the persecution comes, before we go on to the second point, I want to make sure that you understand you're not going to run, you're not going to hide, you're not going to stop speaking, you're not going to conform, and you're not going to do nothing. I want to challenge you with that. I want to challenge you. I think of the young lady at Columbine when I was younger when somebody put a gun to their head and said, "Do you believe in Jesus Christ?" And she unashamedly said, "Yes, I do." I pray that I have that faith. I pray that I can in the midst of all persecution because if we can be honest, church, we're not really persecuted very hardly here, are we? I mean, if you go the 1040 window, that's some persecution. But how do we create a culture where we desire persecution, where we have the opportunity? Well, you want to be persecuted more, you want to have more oppression? Start living more and more like Christ. I guarantee you, if you live in Opelika, Lee County, and you start publicly speaking Jesus everywhere you go, people are going to be like, "What in the world is wrong with you?" I'm guilty of it too.

So understand, have a plan, know that if you're going to live this way, persecution is going to come on you hard. So what must we do with the gospel? In verses 4 through 8 we see that it says, "Therefore they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word." So those that followed Jesus Christ, that's the "they" in this passage, they went preaching Jesus, speaking of Jesus, telling people of Jesus. That's what preaching means, the good news of Jesus Christ.

In verse 5 it says, "Then Philip," we're introduced to Philip, Philip was a follower of the Way and he "went down to the city of Samaria," understand that they were set up on a mountain and they went down into this area and he "preached Christ unto them." And here's where it gets kind of crazy. We need to understand a few things about the Samaritans in general. They were hated by everybody. The Jews didn't like them. The Gentiles didn't like them. The Jews didn't like them because they thought the Samaritans felt like they were better than the Jews. The Gentiles didn't like them because they were part of this different sect. But let me ask you a question: if you're Philip, do you think Samaria was the first place he chose? I often wondered that as I was studying this passage. Why Samaria? I mean, he's Jewish, why would he go to Samaria, they don't like them? Because God wants us to know that those that we don't like the most are the ones that we need to share Jesus with the most, and if you sit here today, I guarantee you you're all thinking of that person that you just despise and you're like, "Oh gosh, I gotta go share Jesus with them this week." You're dang right you do because we learn through the word of God that this gospel message by going to Samaria is for all people. It's for all people.

Now here's what's crazy. Here's what happens with the gospel when we go preach the gospel, when we keep going and telling people about the gospel and it's very important that you understand this, "For unclean spirits," we're in verse 7 now, "For unclean spirits, crying with loud voice, came out of many that were possessed with them: and many taken with palsies, and that were lame, were healed." Now understand what that says in simple terms is this was a dark place but Jesus is the light. So he goes to a

dark place with people that he doesn't really enjoy to be around, yet he knows that this is what God wants and so he's faithful and what happens? The gospel explodes.

Verse 8, we're going to hit on this twice but I want you to see, "And there was great joy in that city." There was great joy in that city. The great joy in that city is because of the gospel which tells us as readers of God's word that there was no hope in this city. They were deceived by a sorcerer. I don't have enough time to go into Acts 8. I mean, it is just this dense, thick, bloody mess of theological principles but understand this: we're going to be persecuted and we have to know that it's coming and then that second point is this, we've got to keep preaching the gospel. Philip went down, they went down, and what did they do? They didn't to tiddly-winks. They didn't go buy shoes or whatever. They went and preached. That's their mission, to keep telling, keep living, and keep loving this gospel message.

And as we see in verses 4 through 17 of going down to this idea, the third thing is the gospel is for everyone. The hardest person I ever shared the gospel with...well, there was two, they were both two of the strongest men in my life, my father-in-law and my own father. My father-in-law was the first person I ever shared the gospel with. We're driving down the highway, it's highway 285 in New Mexico, this little dirt road, it's flat as all can be, you can see the mountains 100 miles away, and I knew that my purpose was to share the gospel what Jesus had done in my life, filled this void in my life, and so I sat down and we're driving and I said, "Pops, if you died today, where would you go?" And he said, "I'm gonna tell you right now, I'm not going to Faith Baptist Church." I said, "What? I didn't say anything about that." Well, I didn't realize that back a long time ago he had a little quarrel with somebody at the church, but lo and behold because I shared with him the gospel, we continued this conversation because, I mean, I was one of those new believers on fire, I was like, "What? I'm not worried about where you're gonna go. I want to make sure you understand that when you die you're gonna go one of two places and that Jesus loved you so much he died on the cross for your sins. And I want to make sure that you understand that." Well, a year later by the grace of God, he got saved and baptized at Faith Baptist Church. Isn't that crazy? Yeah, it's wild. Thankfully he was thinking about coming today but he didn't come so I can tell this story.

The other person was my... y'all laugh, my wife is here and she's going, "Oh boy." The second one is my dad. My dad was raised Catholic. Alcoholic. And I got saved and he saw a transformation in my wife and I's life and our marriage because we became selfless people who tried to serve and love each other, and when I get around my dad, if you don't know anything about AA and Alcoholics Anonymous, they have this thing called the big book and I'd let that go and I'd be like, "Dad, you know they got the big book from principles in the Book, right?" And he'd be like, "Oh yeah." And then he started referring to my God as a higher power and it just convicted me and it challenged me and I was like, "Dad, you're really offending me." He's like, "Well, what do you mean? He's the higher power." I said, "No, dad." I said, "If you're gonna refer to my God, he's God. That's it. Period." That was the first time in my life my dad ever paused and I thought, "This is it. This is where he's gonna beat me to a pulp." My dad's not a big man but I thought, "This is it. This is it."

Well, a couple of months later, I get a Facetime call and he says, "Paul, I want to share something with you." I said, "What's that?" And him and my mom were sitting right there in Facetime, you know, technology is great. He goes, "Hey, we asked Jesus Christ to save us today." I'm telling you, I got to go back to the town that I was raised in, where I was a sinner, a heathen, I did not know Christ ever in the town I grew up in, and I got to go back to the largest church and baptize both my mom and my dad. And my dad has become more of a spiritual leader than I ever was to him and he's faithful and he's an elder at this church, and he loves the Lord to the point where I'm like, "Dad, I know Jesus. You can stop. Like relax." But that's what it looks like when we're on fire because we have this desire of every person wanting to come and know Jesus Christ.

And when we look at the Samaritans, you have to understand the lens culturally, Samaritans were not liked by anybody and it is easy for us, church, to share the gospel with those that look like us and dress like us and act like us, but the mom with six kids at the grocery store where they're running amok and half of them don't have shoes on, and we're just trying to stay out of their way because they're causing another scene, and God's telling us and he's moving us and you can feel the conviction that you should walk over and say, "Ma'am, are you okay?" But we're comfortable in America. It's easy to be a Christian here. I promise you, I've been to places where it is not easy to be a Christian and my desire is that it gets harder for us locally because then we're going to see who's really willing to step out in faith and preach and share this hope of Jesus Christ.

That's my challenge, church, and the fourth thing that I want to look at here is what does the gospel do? What does the gospel do? And we see in verse 8 the gospel brings joy. One of the things that we have learned in Western culture in America is that we can buy comfortability for a season. Lou Holtz said it best, "If you're hungry, eat a steak, you'll be happy for an hour. If you're tired, go on vacation, you'll be rested for a week. But if you want a lifetime of happiness, follow Jesus Christ." And I know Lou Holtz was probably a Catholic and all that but understand that the premise of the statement is perfect. If you want true unashamed joy, you've got to follow Jesus because the joy is not because of the persecution that is in our life or is coming in our life, the joy is because of what God did through his Son on the cross, knowing that no matter what happens on this earth, that we are going to be called home and we will get to spend eternity as Isaiah 55, proclaiming, "Holy, holy, holy are you, Lord God Almighty!" That's what we get to do. That's our joy, knowing that that is coming and we are going to get to proclaim the God that created us, that has a plan for us, and is going to use us in a mighty mighty way.

So church, I want to encourage you with three things, three practical applicable steps for when you leave. The first one is this: understand that persecution is either going to happen, is happening when you preach and follow Jesus.

A second thing is this: you need to evaluate your mission and are you living a gospel-centered life? I desire that you leave this place saying, "You know, I want to be persecuted." It's not a word that you think is going to bring excitement but as a former athlete, I loved it when I knew we were playing a better team and as Christians we should

be saying, "You know what? I want some persecution. That's a reminder and an affirmation that I am living a life that is all about Jesus Christ and his message of hope." So it doesn't sound quite right but I'm telling you, that's the truth. Persecution should drive us to preach Jesus even harder.

Then the third thing is this: remember the joy that comes with the gospel and that no matter what, we are to keep preaching the gospel. That's our mission.

We see in Acts 8 an early early baby church that was persecuted for the message of hope, for the good news of the gospel of Jesus and they were scattered. God used that to say, "Do you know what? I'm just..." It's kind of like when you have a child and you're trying to get them to go into school for the very first time and they're clinging on your leg because that's the comfortable spot, but you know that what is best for them is on the other side of that door to where they can learn and grow, and you kind of have to give them a little nudge and a little shove, that's what God did. He said, "No, no, you can't stay under my umbrella. You need to go out and you've got to go preach and go share the gospel."

I'm reminded of the greatest missionary of all time, what Paul writes in 2 Timothy 11 through 15 and he says this, "Persecutions, afflictions, which came unto me at Antioch, at Iconium, at Lystra; what persecutions I endured: and yet the Lord rescued me from them all." In fact, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. We read that wrong, church. He's saying, "Look, if you want to follow Christ, you're going to be persecuted. Let's go. Be ready. It's coming." But a lot of times that verse gets read, "Well, if you want to follow Jesus, you know, just I want you to be warned, you know, it could get a little rough." He's saying, "No, it's going to happen. Let's go."

And he continues to say this, he gives us, he tells us who: evil people. Well, lost people are evil. You were evil at one time before you knew Christ. You were vile. I was vile. But it's our job to get that message to them. He says, "evil people and impostors will become worse, deceiving and being deceived, but as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed. You know those who taught you and you know that from infancy you have known the sacred scriptures which are able to give you wisdom for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." If you don't know much about Paul, Paul had this yearning desire to go home, this yearning desire to go and worship Christ in heaven, but he knew that his purpose and mission was to preach Jesus, and amidst all the persecutions and the shipwrecks and that's a beautiful passage, if you ever get a chance, Google the laundry list of things that Paul went through and you definitely will not feel very good about yourself. You'll be like, "Man, I have not experienced anything. I've never even been told don't pray for me."

But understand this, church, I'm going to circle all the way back to those two questions I started with, you're either being persecuted because you're living in the way the gospel needs to be, but if you're not being persecuted it's because of two things: you either don't know Jesus or you're not living the way you need to. And if you don't know Jesus, the plan is simple. That's what I love about being a children's pastor, it really is simple.

Romans 10:9-10 is simple, admit, believe and confess. Admit that you're a sinner in need of a Savior. Believe in Jesus' death, burial and resurrection. And confess to God and say, "God, I'm sorry." There's not a magical prayer out there, it's just you telling God, "Look, I can't do this on my own." But if you know without a shadow of a doubt that you're a Christian, that there's not a whole lot of persecution going on in your life, then maybe there's somewhere in your life that needs to change. Maybe you need to be a little bit more bold with the gospel. Maybe the way you act on Sunday and Wednesday needs to look the same on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday. Maybe you just need to take some time right where you're at and pray and say, "God, reveal to me who I can't see. Reveal to me those that need hope." And know that God's going to protect you. Paul tells us that. And we've convinced ourselves, well, this earthly death, if for some reason we died proclaiming Christ, is there a better death? Pray that this week God would give you somebody you can pray with, share the gospel with, serve and love that does not look like you, talk like you, act like you, and we will see radical change for his glory and his kingdom immediately.

In a minute we're going to pray and as I was sitting down there, I noticed we've got some little kneelers and we've got some steps here. I want to encourage you because there's nothing more beautiful than just coming before the Lord with a repentant heart or a prayerful earnest desiring heart to follow God's will and know what God has for you because a lot of times we are content being comfortable and that is not what God has called us to live like. He has called us to be the light. He has called us to be the change in an ever-changing world for his glory. So when I start praying, if you want to come up here and pray, the steps are open. If you are sitting here today and you've never asked Jesus Christ to save you, I'm going to step right down here, I would love nothing more than to share this hope of Jesus Christ.

So with your heads bowed and your eyes closed, I'm going to pray for us. I'm going to invite you to come up here. If you'd like to come and pray, you're more than welcome to and then Brother Tom is going to lead us in a song.

God, we love you and we thank you for who you are. God, we have an example in the book of Acts in chapter 8 of what persecution does and how your message of hope can be expanded when we're faithful and trust you. So God, as a church, challenge us and move us. God, as a church, convict us where we fall short. God, as a body of believers, help us to be the light in our homes, in our community. And God, no matter what anybody says or tries to do to our earthly physical bodies, that our desire would be to make you known, to glorify you in all things. And God, for anybody that's in here that doesn't know Jesus, God, I would ask that you would pierce their hearts that they would desire to know more about your Son Jesus who loves us, who died for us. God, we lift today up to you. It's in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

The steps are open. I'm here if anybody would like to pray.