

# The Glorious Gospel Purpose of Suffering

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at Oak Grove Baptist Church, Paducah, Ky.  
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## I Corinthians 9:14-18

*Even so the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel. 15 But I have used none of these things, nor have I written these things that it should be done so to me; for it would be better for me to die than that anyone should make my boasting void. 16 For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for necessity is laid upon me; yes, woe is me if I do not preach the gospel! 17 For if I do this willingly, I have a reward; but if against my will, I have been entrusted with a stewardship. 18 What is my reward then? That when I preach the gospel, I may present the gospel of Christ without charge, that I may not abuse my authority in the gospel.*

Paul's theme of the ninth chapter of Corinthians is that he and Barnabas did not take financial support from the Corinthians even though they planted a church there. For some reason the Corinthians thought that was an act of inferiority on Paul and Barnabas's part, that they were somehow inferior to other apostles because they did not take financial support.

However, he said the reason he refused their financial support was completely for the Gospel. It had a Gospel context with a Gospel initiative.

The Apostle Paul was so consumed with not just verbally sharing the Gospel but also contextualizing the Gospel. In other words, living the Gospel out in his everyday life in the culture and circumstances of life. Paul understood that verbally proclaiming the Gospel is only one half of the Gospel proclamation.

Although it is a historical fact, the glory and the reality of Jesus' death is as real today as it was two thousand years ago, there is a limitation. Because of its nature, that is being a historical fact—an event never to be repeated again—there is some limitation. It is this: men cannot see Him dying. They cannot behold the Savior on the cross as those who did that day witnessed on Golgotha's crest. Therefore, the message of the Gospel is purely verbal and not demonstrative.

You and I cannot climb the summit of Golgotha and watch the Lord die. Perhaps many of us wouldn't want to do so knowing that we could not endure what we saw and experienced through the senses. Therefore, Paul says he not only wants to proclaim the Gospel, he wants to demonstrate it. The Gospel must not just be proclaimed, it must be acted out.

Well, how are you going to act out the Gospel? Go get yourself crucified? No, not at all. But martyrdom does happen. Martyrs are a way in which every generation sees the Gospel once again

lived out. The martyrs' death redeems no one, they atone for no sins, not even their own. Their sins have been atoned by the death of Jesus Christ, but their death does demonstrate in kind the love of God. The love of God constrained in suffering. That's the backdrop, now read verse fifteen,

*"But I have used none of these things, nor have I written these things that it should be done so to me; for it would be better for me to die than that anyone should make my boasting void."*

Paul says it would be better for him to stop preaching and die than if they could make his boasting empty and purposeless. The question immediately is *what is Paul talking about? Good Christians don't boast, good Christians don't brag.* Oh, quite the contrary! The better the believer can brag, the better they are in their witness for Christ. The more you are able to boast, the stronger you are as a proclaimer. Paul is not talking about boasting in himself, but boasting in the Gospel. Let me show you, verse sixteen,

*"For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for necessity is laid upon me; yes, woe is me if I do not preach the gospel!"*

Here Paul says, my boasting is not that I preach or share the Gospel because if I don't do it I'm damned, woe is me. God called me, I have been constrained, I have no choice but to preach.

*"For if I do this willingly, I have a reward; but if against my will, I have been entrusted with a stewardship" (1 Corinthians 9:17).*

Paul is saying he was given a stewardship of the Gospel and he does not preach all the time so willingly. He said I'm under a constraint, a yoke has been placed upon me and I cannot help but preach. I was on my way on the Damascus Road to do some other kind of business when God arrested and apprehended me and I've been a prisoner of the Lord Jesus Christ ever since.

Therefore, His follow up question is natural.

*"What is my reward then?" (1 Corinthians 9:18a)*

In other words, Paul is asking, If I'm preaching the Gospel under constraint I have very little consent, then what kind of reward should I get? You don't reward prisoners. A slave is not given any reward, he's supposed to labor for his master. So what is my reward?

*"That when I preach the Gospel I may present the Gospel of Christ without charge that I may not abuse my authority in the Gospel" (1 Corinthians 9:18b).*

His boast, his reward, is that he can demonstrate the Gospel. He has to preach it and he could ask financial support from the Corinthians, but he doesn't in order to demonstrate and prove exactly what Jesus Christ did. Jesus came freely, He said the "Son of Man did not come to be ministered unto but to minister and give His life as a ransom for many." Jesus came asking nothing

but giving everything and that's Paul's boast, that he can demonstrate Christ in preaching freely, without charge. He too is freely sacrificing something that is rightfully his so he can be like Jesus and show unconditional love.

Now, brothers and sisters, that is a motif the world does not understand, and many in the church do not either. It's the idea that victory comes through suffering. The Gospel triumphs through a cross. Love is displayed within the frame of pain. The masterpiece of love is always displayed on the canvas of suffering.

Look at 1 Peter 2:18. Because America is no longer a slave nation, we often then take these words and apply them to the closest thing we can think of—an employer/employee relationship. But in the culture it was written—and we don't need to remove it—there were slaves.

*“Servants,” (the word is actually slaves) “be submissive to your masters with all fear, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the harsh for this is commendable.”*

The Apostle Peter says it is good and praiseworthy to innocently suffer harsh treatment. Some of you don't believe the Gospel because it doesn't fit the intellectual framework of your philosophy. Let me tell you why you cannot fathom this Peter's statement: you have an ungodly frame of reference. Your thinking and philosophy is purely from the world. Worldly and biblical systems will not mix, like oil and water. You have to see things from your Creator's perspective. Here it is: that when you suffer innocently it is praiseworthy; it is commendable.

You say to me, “If that's the way God thinks, then I know I don't want anything to do with Him. It sounds to me you're saying that if I give God control of my life I'm just inviting problems.”

Here is an example of what I'm saying. The worldview you're operating by is faulty and overlooks very important facts. In life, all of us are going to have problems, saved and unsaved alike. The Bible says in the book of Job that nothing about life is trouble free, it's just a few days of woe.

*“Man who is born of woman is of few days and full of trouble.” (Job 14:1)*

Life is but a vapor, short and full of tribulation for the saved and unsaved. The difference the Gospel makes is that the believer's sufferings are not in vain. They're not wasted but actually become commendable to us, praiseworthy, something God takes note of and will reward us for. And by the way, it is a way in which we can demonstrate to the unsaved how great our God is. We show our confidence in God, that though He takes us through the valley of the shadow of death we will fear no evil for our God is with us, His rod and staff do comfort us. God inhabits the suffering of His people. We are not alone. In our suffering God is demonstrated to others.

I'll never forget, nor will any of us who knew him, Brother Randall Ramage. He demonstrated for seven years the Gospel to this church, his neighbors, friends and associates. Seven years I saw this man suffer through a fatal and rare disease, always cheerful. I'm sure there were times in private

he poured out his heart to his wife, Martha, times he was questioning and wondering, but all the way through to the end he maintained His integrity, not his own, but God's integrity. That spoke the Gospel in a way that I cannot do by simply preaching the Gospel.

The only rhyme and reason for suffering having any value is the Gospel. It's the only thing that takes our few days of woe and makes it understandable. What purpose are you suffering your woes and tribulations? For what reason are you living and spending your life in this world? When trouble comes to your doorstep what purpose will it have for you? You who are without Christ, you are without purpose in suffering. No wonder you hate suffering, there is no reason for it in your eyes. For me, for this church, for believers—there is much reason and there is hope.

It is a beautiful thing to suffer in Christ because God is using our lives. He called those lives, in 2 Corinthians 5, *earthen vessels* that He has put His treasure in—which is Christ—and He breaks the earthen vessels so the glory on the inside can come out. That is a beautiful thing.

*“For if this is commendable, if because of conscience toward God one endures grief, suffering wrongfully. For what credit is it if,”* (Unbeliever, I want you to listen to me. What credit is it for you today), *“when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God. For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: ‘who committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth;’ who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously; who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness—by whose stripes you were healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls”* (1 Peter 2:19-25).

Turn to the fourth chapter in the same epistle of Peter, verse 12,

*“Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you. But rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings.”*

How is it possible, dear brother, that here in September 2012 you and I could partake of the sufferings of Christ, a historical event? By demonstrating to the world in a small measure what Jesus did when He innocently suffered. When we suffer for the Gospel we do show the world the suffering of Jesus Christ. You are taking up the very cross we are commanded to carry. Bear it gladly, my friend, so the world can see that Jesus suffered for sinners. And when His glory is revealed through your trial, then you may be glad with exceeding joy. The whole point of this is that God's glory is revealed. The whole point of our suffering is that Jesus Christ and His suffering for sinners is glorified and magnified.

Please note when I say suffering for the Gospel's sake, I do not mean what you probably think I mean. I do not mean going to a foreign mission field and giving your life or liquidating all your personal goods and moving to a third world country and living in poverty so you might take

the Gospel to someone who is lost in sin. It would certainly include that, of course. But I mean suffering to be every problem, whether it is Leukemia, financial distress, rebellious children, an unsaved spouse, or physical problems you can demonstrate the Gospel. It doesn't matter what the suffering is, if you bear it patiently for the glory of Christ it is as much for the Gospel's sake as is the person who has left this country of prosperity and gone to another in order to preach the Gospel and, if need be, give their lives for it. You will determine if your suffering is for the Gospel's sake by patiently enduring it and bearing it for the glory of Jesus.

So I beg you all, don't waste your suffering! Don't waste your trials and tribulations; this is God working so you can preach the Gospel not just by what you say, but how you live. Live the cross!

We should be asked this all the time, "I know your life, I know what you have to endure. How do you do it? How do you endure all so cheerfully? I endure the same problems, but I can't do it the way you do. There is something different." The difference they are recognizing is the Gospel and, with their question, you now have an opportunity to proclaim the Gospel.

A year ago Brother Bobby shared that he was going through severe trials and even temptation and I will never forget the response I felt the Lord impress upon my heart to say to him. I said, "Those trials are prophets, prophesying that God is about to do something in a larger way, and preparing you for that." As I talked to him day before yesterday, he reminded me of this. Now His daughter has been diagnosed with Leukemia. He reminded me when those issues occurred a year ago and how God was preparing him for this.

If this church is "under attack" it is because we are laying ourselves before God and finally coming to the conclusion that apart from Him we can do nothing and that we're not so important after all in the grand scheme. I believe it is because we are willing to submit ourselves completely and whole-heartedly to Christ and His purpose. We will allow God to initiate His purposes in us instead of trying to do it for God. Satan knows the potential of a people when they humble themselves under the hand of God. But, my dear friends, more importantly, God knows. God will allow things to come into our life that will be, as I said Wednesday night, like little dots on a piece of paper. At the time the dots, meaning suffering and trials, do not make sense in and of themselves, but if you properly connect them and follow their trajectory, those dots will make a beautiful picture.

I've told you all that God gave me a promise nearly nineteen years ago, and He's bringing it to pass, but not in the way I thought. Nineteen years ago, I thought God would bring the promise to pass and we'd have a five-thousand-seat sanctuary with this and that wonderful ministry. But God has shown me that was my plan, our church's plan, but it wasn't His plan or agenda for us. He has shown me that what He is going to do is going to be done in such a way that none of us could boast, especially not the preacher. He is going to do it in His way, through the Gospel—the old fashioned way—where He is going to take His Treasure, put it in earthen vessels and crack those vessels a little more so the glorious treasure can be emitted.

If you're not a Christian today and you're watching your mom and dad suffer, I pray they uphold the cross and the joy Jesus demonstrated. "For the joy that was set before Him, He endured the cross." I pray for parents here who are suffering with children who are in rebellion, don't get angry with them, rather remember it is commendable that you suffer and patiently endure it. Pray for them, love them and show them what Jesus suffered in measure that though He was reviled He did not revile again. As He entrusted Himself to One whom was trustworthy, you can trust your children to God and He can save their souls. Don't pit yourself against that child. That child is lost, he doesn't know what else to do, its fighting, trying to find its way in the world. I understand that. What they need to see is the Gospel demonstrated. They've heard you tell the story so many times as they sat upon your knee, now let them see you on your knees, living the Gospel out.

This same word to us today is if you humble yourself in the sight of God, He will in due season exalt you. He will bring to you the answers you are praying and waiting expectantly for. He may say that we may have to wait a bit longer, we may have to suffer a while longer, but afterward their will be exaltation and reward. The Lord will exalt you and bless you in a way that even you could not dream. That's the way of the Gospel.

There was the death and the suffering of Christ, but three days later He rose again. Every suffering has a resurrection day! Every day of struggle and misery has a day of triumph and power that transcends the suffering. Be encouraged today—God knows your suffering! He brought it to you so that you can do what Paul did: boast that he could suffer freely and thereby demonstrate the Gospel. This is good news, church!

So as I bring this to a conclusion, yes, the motif is different. Many sinners that you will lead to Christ in the days, months and years to come, will not be able to understand this Gospel mystery of suffering. They will not understand, but then who understands the mystery of Jesus Christ being crucified for us? We sang about it earlier, we still look at the suffering of the cross and say,

*"And can it be? That Thou my God should die for me?!"*

We are still blown away by the mystery of it all. Don't expect sinners to understand; leave that with God. God will be glorified in your suffering and the Gospel will go forth. Preach it by your mouth and by your life as you suffer for Him. It is a beautiful thing!

Dear children of God, you've got to get your mind out of the world and the world's frame of reference and start thinking according to this Book that blesses and commends your suffering. If you are struggling with suffering today and can't have happiness and joy in it, it is because you are thinking through the world's philosophy. You're not thinking the way this Book says. You say, *Well I just don't want to bring myself to think like that.* Why not? It's the only thing that gives any reason and explanation for your suffering. Otherwise you're out in the cold with the sinner who has no explanation for his woes.

When the sinner asks why is a good God letting all these bad things happen, and you explain to him that people made a choice to reject this good God and His mercies, they do not understand. When you tell him or her that the amazing thing is, He loves and blesses us to the degree He does. Tell the sinner that the question shouldn't be why do bad things happen to good people, but why does God do good things for bad people? They will not get the line of your spiritual reasoning. They don't have a clue, they can't understand that. But something melts the heart of the sinner when they see one suffer and yet rejoice.

I think of a story. A true story. Dan Nichols a missionary to India contracted tuberculosis in 1967. He was treated in a sanatorium in India, and while there he tried passing out copies of the gospel of John to the other patients. Everyone rejected his gift. One night while lying awake from coughing he saw an old man trying to struggle to rise from his bed to get to the toilet. But his strength was not enough and frustrated he fell back and wept as he relieved himself in his bed. The next day the patients cruelly mocked him for the odor and the nurse was anything but kind as she cleaned up the old man's soiled clothes and bed. The next night the same scenario played itself out, yet this time Dan got up and walked over the old man's bed, picked him up and carried him to the restroom, and brought him back. At 4 a.m. Dan was awakened by someone bringing him a cup of tea requesting a copy of the gospel of John. The remainder of the copies were given away as all day long people came requesting a copy. What was the difference? They saw a demonstration of the gospel and it compelled them to hear it or in this case read it.

Could it be possible that an omniscient God who can see things that we cannot see could let a man contract tuberculosis in order to preach the Gospel to patients in a sanatorium? You better believe God could and does do things like this. He's already told us His ways are not our ways and His thoughts are so far above us.

Trying to explain your puny little world with your little paradigm and then accuse God of being mean is blasphemy of the highest order. It is hatred and a rejection of my Jesus and I warn you, be careful! "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son." He loved the world so much that He put His Son through suffering so that you could be saved. So don't mock God's ways, Jesus' sufferings is God's love to reach you. That is a beautiful thing. Amen.