

MULTIPLYING LOCAL CHURCHES BY SUFFERING FOR THE GOSPEL

2 Timothy 1:3-18

INTRODUCTION

John Piper in his book “Desiring God” recounts an interview of a Christian monk on Italian TV. The interviewer asks the monk, who has spent his life in solitude and silence, praying, “What if you were to realize at the end of your life that atheism is true—that there is no God? Tell me, what if that were true?” The monk answers the interviewer by stating, “Holiness, silence and sacrifice are beautiful in themselves, even without promise of reward. I still will have used my life well.” Piper goes on to point out how great a gulf there is between this monk’s view of Christianity and the Apostle Paul’s view. He says, “The interviewer had asked, ‘What if your way of life turns out to be based on a falsehood and there is no God?’ The monk’s answer was, ‘It was a good and noble life anyway.’ Paul gives his answer in 1 Corinthians 15:19, ‘If in this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.’ This is the exact opposite of the monk’s answer.... So what is wrong with Paul? Was he not living the abundant life? The answer seems to be that the Christian life for Paul was not the so-called life of prosperity and ease. Instead it was a life of freely chosen suffering...”

This is exactly the point that Paul makes to his dear child in the faith, Timothy, who is serving as a pastor in the local church in the city of Ephesus. He commands him, in v. 8 to “not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord or of me his prisoner but share in suffering for the gospel.” What would cause Timothy to be ashamed of the gospel and of Paul? Paul has in mind here the fear of being disapproved of or even hated by people because of our proclamation of the gospel or because of our association with those who are known for their proclamation of the gospel. Paul has in mind the fear of losing comforts and of suffering hardship because of a life given to promoting the gospel. Paul tells Timothy, “don’t fear the disapproval of others or the loss of earthly pleasure but rather boldly proclaim Christ and boldly associate with others who also proclaim Christ and endure whatever trouble might come from your boldness.” In 2:10 Paul says that he endures all manner of suffering for the sake of the elect so that they may share in the glorious salvation that Christ has obtained for all his people. In other words, Paul tells us that the normal Christian life is a life of chosen loss and hardship and sacrifice for the purpose of promoting the good news of Jesus so that all of God’s chosen people are brought safely home.

It is true that this letter is addressed by an apostle to a young man who is a pastor and thus relates most directly to God’s call for pastors/elders and missionaries to suffer loss for the progress of the gospel. However, as I have pointed out to you before, God intends for the leaders of local churches to be examples of Christian living to the entire congregation. Thus every true Christian is to “share in suffering for the gospel.” Every Christian will suffer losses and difficulties and hardships in this life as a result of his or her desire to promote the gospel of Jesus so that all of Jesus’ people are saved. The ways in which God calls a mom with young children to suffer for the gospel is not the same way he calls a 17 year old high school student to suffer for the gospel is not the way he calls a 65 year old retiree to suffer for the gospel is not the way he calls a family living as missionaries in Indonesia to suffer for the gospel. While the losses and hardships we will experience differ, yet, of this you can be sure: God expects every Christian to suffer the loss of all sorts of legitimate earthly pleasures because of our desire to promote the gospel of Christ into our families and community and into the world. As we are involved in bringing his salvation to all of his lost sheep in our region by personal evangelism and by the planting of other gospel preaching churches we will experience the loss of time and comfort and money and sleep and a whole host of other difficulties.

All of us, like Timothy, want to avoid trouble. By nature we all would like to live a long, healthy life in a happy family with yearly vacations and to die in our sleep before our retirement money runs out. But friend that is not God’s will for your life. We all need to hear, like Timothy, what Paul says in this opening chapter of 2 Timothy so that we will gladly embrace the costs associated with guarding the good deposit of the gospel of Christ for

the sake of all God's lost sheep in our homes, neighborhoods, city, county and around the world. We need to hear the reasons for why each of us should not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord but share in suffering for the sake of the gospel.

MAIN POINT

Christians embrace a life of suffering for the progress of the gospel by remembering...

I. Their own conversion (vv.5-7)

I want you to notice that v. 8 begins with "therefore". Paul roots his command to Timothy in v. 8 in what he has just said to Timothy in vv. 5-7. The reason Timothy should not be ashamed but share in suffering for the gospel is because God saved his grandmother and mother and they taught him the gospel as revealed in the OT Scriptures from his childhood. In v. 6 Paul tells Timothy it is because he has a sincere faith in Jesus that he should fan into flame the gift he received at his commissioning service to be a pastor/elder. He is to remember that God called him into his current position as a pastor/elder in this local church through the commissioning of Paul himself and gave him a spiritual gift at that time that would enable him do the work he is called to do. In v. 7 he is to remember that when God saved him he gave him, as he has given all Christians, a spirit not of fear but the Spirit who provides God's power, God's love and God's discerning self-control. Paul calls attention to the particular details of Timothy's spiritual history and of all the particular benefits he has received from God for the purpose of fulfilling God's call upon his life so that he will share in suffering for the gospel.

How does remembering what God has done to save you and bring you to your current situation strengthen your resolve to take risks and lose comfort for the sake of advancing the gospel in the lives of other people? First, as we think about how God used other people to bring us to himself we are motivated to be an instrument of God's grace in the lives of others. One of the things I have told literally hundreds of people with whom I have spoken about the gospel is that when I first began thinking about Jesus as a junior in college I knew very little but I had the good fortune to meet several people who knew far more than I and were willing to talk with me and answer my questions. Thus, I have said to many people, "I am eager to meet with you if you are interested to help you as I was helped those many years ago." We want God to use us to help others in the same way others were used by God to help us.

Second, while we have not been officially commissioned into pastoral ministry in the city of Ephesus yet just as certainly as God called and gifted Timothy for his ministry so God has called each us to RHCC and to our families and neighborhoods and work places and gifted us to serve him in these places. Recognizing that God has sovereignly placed us here and gifted us for the gospel and for the building up of the body of Christ ought to enable us to give up time and energy to further the work of the gospel in all the places he has put us. Finally, why is it that we, like Timothy, have a hard time "sharing in suffering for the gospel?" We are afraid that if we take risks or give up time and money or suffer some other loss for the sake of the gospel that we will not be taken care of, that we will be harmed, that we or our family will suffer some irretrievable loss. What verse 7 tells us is that if we are making decisions about what we will do or not do based on fear, we are most certainly not following the HS's leading. The HS has given us the power and the love and the self-control that we need to do everything God wants us to do, no matter what it might cost us. We should willingly suffer the loss of comfort and safety to be part of the work of passing on the gospel to more people because God has supplied us with everything we need to do so by the HS who dwells within us.

II. The glory of God in the gospel (vv.8-10)

Verses 8-10 are an exceptionally clear and concise summary of the good news of Christ. Paul includes this beautiful summary at this point in his letter to remind Timothy of this glorious God who has provided this astonishing salvation so that he will gladly share in suffering for the gospel. John Calvin is correct when he says that Paul writes this summary to show "the salvation he has bestowed on us easily swallows up all the evils that must be endured in this world." As Olympic gold medal winners do not regret for a moment all the work

and self-denial they endured to obtain the medal, so the children of God will consider every loss they experienced here as they followed Jesus as nothing in comparison to the glory of that salvation God has provided. Let me highlight some of the glory of this salvation for us so that we will embrace a life of suffering for the gospel.

All who have faith in Christ can say with Paul, "God saved us." These three words contain an ocean of joy. This language indicates that we are in grave danger from which we cannot rescue ourselves. We are like the person trapped on the 10th story of a burning building that is rescued by the fireman climbing up the ladder. We are like the person buried under the rubble of a house in an earthquake who is rescued by others. We are people who are on death row, awaiting our just execution for the crimes we have committed against a holy and just God. But then the prison door is opened and we are saved, rescued from an eternal hell by the God against whom we have sinned. This God who saves us does so by calling us to a holy calling. Paul means by this language that God announces the gospel to us, commanding us to believe it and with his command he also gives us the ability to obey the command by believing. This calling is exemplified in Jesus' raising of Lazarus from the dead. Lazarus was in the tomb and had been dead for 4 days. Jesus commands the stone be rolled away from the tomb and then he commands dead Lazarus to come out of the tomb. How can a dead man obey a command? He obeys because Jesus gives his life to Lazarus as he calls him forth from the tomb. If you are a Christian, this is exactly what God has done for you; he has given you his life so that you obeyed his command to believe the gospel by believing it. As a result of God's effectually calling you out of sin and death and rebellion you are now made holy in God's sight. You are now and will always be one who belongs to God.

Next, in v. 9, God did not save us or call us because we were trying hard to be saved or because we had somehow shown God by our good works that he ought to save us. God saves and calls sinners who have done nothing except sin. God is not obligated to save you. God would be perfectly just if he left you in your sins and did not save you because you have never done or decided anything to deserve his salvation but have always lived in such a way as to call forth his wrath against you. The reason God saves any sinner is not because of you but because it accords with his purpose and his grace. Sinners don't decide to go to heaven. God decided before he created anything who would go to heaven. God, before he created the universe, determined to save unworthy sinners in accordance with his own purposes and as an expression of his free and sovereign kindness. If you are a Christian this morning he determined to save you in and through the person and work of Jesus before time began. He thought of you, dead in your sins and determined, according to his own purposes and because of his unmerited kindness to send Christ to live and die for you and determined to send the HS to you and someone to tell you the gospel so that when you heard the HS enabled you to believe it.

While God's decision to save sinners in Christ took place before the ages began yet that salvation was revealed when he sent his only Son into the world to perfectly obey the law and to suffer the curse of the law in the place of everyone who believes in Jesus. Jesus our Savior, by his willing death and his glorious resurrection abolished death. Death died for everyone who believes in the death of our Savior Jesus. Death is nothing to us any longer. We do not fear it for its ability to harm us was destroyed when Jesus took upon himself the wrath of God against us. For everyone who believes death is no longer entry into eternal suffering but entry into eternal life because Jesus brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. We have been given God's life through Christ and we will be given immortal, incorruptible bodies when Christ returns. What Christ accomplished for us 2000 years ago was announced to us when we heard this good news. The announcement of what Christ has done is the means by which God saves and calls us now.

This salvation of free grace which we have received has made us forever secure. There is nothing to fear. There is no loss which can harm us because God saved us through Christ. There is nothing which can separate us from the love of Christ for us. Whatever pleasure or comfort we lose here because of our promotion of this gospel will be more than repaid in the new heavens and the new earth. So do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord but share in suffering for the gospel.

III. God's commitment to guard his gospel (vv. 11-14)

Paul turns from describing the gospel to reflect upon his relationship to that gospel. God has made him a herald of that gospel, an apostle of that gospel and a teacher of that gospel. Paul's entire life is taken up with announcing this good news, teaching this good news and acting as Christ's authoritative spokesperson for this good news. His attachment to Christ and his gospel is the reason he has suffered and is suffering. Why does Paul remind Timothy of this fact? Look at what he says next in v. 12. In spite of the fact that my life is full of pain and hardship because of this gospel, I am not ashamed of it. Or to say it positively, Paul boasts in or is proud of Christ and the salvation he has won for every believer and delights to talk about it. He doesn't care if it makes people mad at him or results in his losing comforts in this life.

Notice that he says he is not ashamed of this gospel for two reasons. First, he knows the one in whom he has trusted. Paul knows the Triune God and so he is not ashamed of the gospel, he does not fear the difficulties and hardships that come with a life given to living and promoting this good news. There is a direct correlation between how well you know God and how eagerly you promote his gospel. Second, he is absolutely persuaded that the God in whom he has trusted is able to guard what has been entrusted to him until the day that Jesus returns. If you compare English translations you will notice that there is a disagreement here about how to translate the Greek text. Some (like the NIV) say that Paul is persuaded that God is able to guard what he, Paul, has entrusted to God while others, like the ESV say that Paul is persuaded that God is able to guard what he, God, has entrusted to Paul. The commentators are equally divided as well. The reason for the disagreement is because what the Greek literally says is this: "...I am persuaded that he is able to guard my deposit." That word "deposit" is used two verses later in reference to the gospel when Paul commands Timothy to guard the good deposit which was entrusted to him. It is also used at the end of Paul's first letter to Timothy to refer to the gospel entrusted to Timothy. The verb that comes from this noun is used in 2:2 for the act of entrusting the gospel to faithful men who will teach others. In view of this use of the word and in view of the fact that Paul's concern in this chapter is with the faithful proclamation of the gospel it seems to me that the thing that Paul is confident of is that God will guard his gospel; he will make sure that it accomplishes the salvation of all of his people right up until Jesus comes back.

How does knowing this help us to take risks and suffer loss for the gospel? I don't think this is hard to figure out. Paul is in prison for preaching the gospel and, according to what he says at the end of this letter, he expects to die in prison. Everywhere he has gone he has witnessed violent opposition to the gospel. It would be easy to feel like he has wasted his life; that he has been part of a losing cause. It can often feel that way for us as well. When your family and friends are regularly hostile or indifferent to the gospel and the world around us appears to be completely unconcerned with God's salvation, it feels as though we are part of a losing enterprise. What is the point of making any sacrifice for the sake of the gospel when every sacrifice we make appears fruitless? It often appears as if nobody and nothing changes. Why should I keep on reading the Bible with my children when they complain about doing so? Why should I keep talking with my co-worker when she just keeps mocking me for my beliefs? Why should I keep giving money to the church when my wife never changes even though we go to church every Sunday? Why should I help out in the GIFTS homeless shelter when none of these guys seems interested in Jesus? Paul says, I am not ashamed; I keep promoting the gospel because God himself is committed to using this gospel to save everyone of his scattered children. God is exercising his omnipotent power, the same power that he exercised to create a universe of 100's of billions of stars and the same power he exercised in raising Jesus from the dead to give life to his people through this gospel and so it is never a waste to suffer loss in order to promote this gospel.

It is because of God's commitment to his gospel that Paul commands Timothy and us to hold to the pattern of sound words that Paul taught and to guard the good deposit entrusted to us. The most precious thing that you and I have been given is this good news of God's gracious salvation in and through the person and work of Jesus. This gospel is more precious than our spouses, our children, our homes, our jobs, our freedoms as US citizens and our retirement accounts. We are to be obsessed with this word from God. We are to learn it and be able to distinguish between it and false gospels. We are to grow in our ability to apply it to our own lives and circumstances and in our ability to teach it to others. We are to defend it against all assaults and to make sure it

is passed on to our children. We are obsessed with it because it alone is God's power for the salvation of everyone who believes.

IV. The example of others (vv.15-18)

In these last verses Paul identifies for Timothy three men whom Timothy knows. Remember, Timothy lives in Ephesus which is the capital city of the Roman province of Asia. He first reminds Timothy of those men from Asia, Phygelus and Hermogenes, who deserted Paul because they were ashamed of his imprisonment. They feared for their own safety and so when the authorities came to arrest Paul they fled and left him alone. Then he tells Timothy about another man, from Ephesus, whom Timothy knew, by the name of Onesiphorus. This man, upon hearing of Paul's arrest, traveled from Ephesus to Rome and searched earnestly for Paul. This would mean that he had to talk to the same authorities who had arrested Paul and thus expose himself to their inquiries. He didn't give up until he found Paul and when he did he often visited him, provided him with food and clothing, prayed with him, in short, he often refreshed Paul during the course of his imprisonment. Notice in v. 18, Paul reminds Timothy that this is how Onesiphorus has lived his entire life as a Christian. He was a faithful worker for the gospel in Ephesus before he went to Rome to help Paul. Think of all that Onesiphorus lost in order to care for Paul. He had to leave behind his family, his wife and children. He left behind his job and source of income. He traveled a great distance at his own expense. He risked being arrested. He spent his own resources to care for Paul. He gave up quite a bit to help Paul and he did so because of his love for Christ and the good news of his saving work.

Twice Paul prays God's mercy upon Onesiphorus and his family. Paul is not saying that he deserves God's mercy because of what he has done for Paul for mercy is undeserved kindness to helpless people. Rather, Paul is asserting this basic fact of suffering for the gospel: every loss we experience here will be more than made up for when Jesus returns. In fact, there is a direct correlation, a proportionality between the joy of heaven and the suffering we have endured here in and with Jesus. The more you lose here as you follow Jesus the greater will be your joy in heaven.

Why does Paul remind Timothy of these three men and of God's reward for Onesiphorus? Paul knows how important it is for us to see examples of those who have faithfully lived the Christian life. Paul says, "Timothy don't be ashamed of the gospel like Phygelus and Hermongenes but rather share in suffering for the gospel like Onesiphorus." In my own life I have often been encouraged to persist in following Jesus by the examples of others. I have often felt, if they can do it, so can I. The first year after I became a Christian I read the journal of the martyred missionary Jim Elliott. He and three other men were killed in 1954 by a tribal group in Central America to whom they were seeking to bring the gospel. He left behind a wife and daughter. He wrote in his journal, "A man is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." That sentence, illustrated by his life, became for me, as for thousands of Christians, a strong motivation to leave behind my plans to become an environmental lawyer and go into the Christian ministry. Countless times over the years I have been helped to persist in following Jesus and seeking to promote his gospel by the examples of other faithful Christians who have endured much loss and suffering. In fact, the people that help me the most are those who suffer loss and yet persist in trusting and obeying our suffering Savior Jesus.

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