WHY SUFFER FOR THE GOSPEL?

2 Timothy 1:9

By

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We’re all prone to choose a life of comfort and ease over a path that will entail difficulties. So how would you go about convincing someone to persevere in serving Christ when it entails persecution and maybe martyrdom? That was Paul’s task as he wrote this final letter to his younger disciple, Timothy. Paul was facing execution for the sake of the gospel. He had endured numerous hardships already, as Timothy well knew (3:11). Now Paul was handing the torch to Timothy, who was a bit hesitant to take it. He knew that following in Paul’s steps would take him on a path of certain suffering for the sake of the gospel (1:8). Why should he go that route? Why suffer for the gospel?

Most evangelistic appeals today pitch the gospel as the way to have an abundant life. “Jesus came to offer you abundant life. Trust in Him and He will give you peace, joy, and a truly happy life.” While all of those claims are true if properly defined, what the salesman hasn’t told the potential customer is that your problems may grow much worse after you have trusted in Christ.

When we pitch Jesus as a better way to self-fulfillment, we’re promoting an Americanized message that is not identical with the biblical gospel. What if the potential convert is from a Muslim background? Will his life be one of trouble-free happiness if he trusts in Christ? His family will disown him and possibly kill him because he converted to Christianity. What if he is from China? He may lose his job or be sent to a labor camp on account of his Christian faith. In 2 Timothy 3:12, Paul says, “Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” We had better present a gospel that is worth suffering for!

In the Greek text, verses 8-11 are a single sentence. In verse 8, Paul exhorts Timothy not to “be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, or of me His prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God.” Then in 1:12, Paul states, “For this reason, I also suffer these things, but I am not ashamed.” So our text is sandwiched between an exhortation to embrace suf-
fearing for the gospel without shame and an example of one who had done so. The motive that Paul uses to urge Timothy to embrace suffering is the glorious gospel of God’s sovereign grace. He is saying that...

Because God has saved us by His sovereign grace, we should be willing to suffer for the gospel.

Getting a grasp of the glorious truth that God saved us according to His own purpose and grace, which was granted to us in Christ Jesus from all eternity, will give us the strength to endure suffering for the sake of the gospel. Remember, these words are coming to us from the Holy Spirit through the mouth of a man who is facing imminent execution on account of the gospel. So these truths are powerfully practical, but we must understand and submit to them in order to benefit from them.

Before we examine the text, I want to respond to a frequent objection that I hear that goes like this: “Steve, why do you put such a strong emphasis on God’s sovereignty in salvation? You’re always bringing up the doctrine of election. It’s just a divisive issue that gets people upset. Some have left this church because you hammer so much on this. Why not just emphasize other things that aren’t so controversial? Besides, people want to hear more practical truth. This may have been an interesting topic in seminary, but we need practical help with our problems. So, back off!”

Here is my response. First, the reason that I mention the subject of God’s sovereignty so often is that the Bible mentions it often. I preach through the Bible verse to verse. If it’s in the text, I talk about it, even if it’s controversial. It just so happens that the Bible often talks about God’s sovereignty with regard to our salvation. Not only Paul, but also Jesus spoke often about these matters.

But I cannot be faithful in preaching the whole counsel of God if I tiptoe around the subject of God’s sovereign election. I realize that it is difficult to understand and that it takes time to grasp these things. It took me a long time to wrestle with these truths before I embraced them. I grant you the time to struggle. Because of this, I feel the need to take the time to explain these doctrines when they are in the text. But I won’t dodge biblical truth just because it is controversial or difficult to understand.
By the way, I did not come to believe in these truths by reading Calvin or Edwards or Spurgeon or any other of the men who taught these things. I came to believe these things as a college student by wrestling with God’s Word, especially Romans 9. I didn’t read Calvin’s Institutes until I had been a pastor for about 13 years. To label and dismiss these truths as “Calvinism” is not fair or intellectually honest. Calvin was just wrestling to understand the same Bible that we have. You should follow that example.

So, I’m not doing you a favor if I dodge what God saw fit to put repeatedly in His Word. These truths are intensely practical, because they have to do with your view of God, your view of man as a sinner, and your view of salvation. When Paul taught these truths, he burst into spontaneous praise (Rom. 11:33-36). So the bottom line of understanding these truths is so that we would bow in worship and ascribe all glory to God. Paul didn’t write Romans for theologians, but for the believers in Rome, many of whom were uneducated slaves. Jesus taught the truths of election to the common Jewish farmers and fishermen of His day.

So I exhort you not to run from the hard work of thinking through these truths by saying, “Nobody can understand these things or come to agreement, so why bother?” Our text is saying that these truths are at the core of the gospel and that understanding them will give you the strength to endure suffering for the sake of the gospel. For sake of time, I must limit myself to verse 9. Next week we’ll study verses 10 & 11.

1. The gospel is about God’s salvation of sinners by His sovereign grace.

The gospel is clearly a dominant theme here (1:8, 10). The gospel is the good news that God saves sinners. Never get over that! Paul reveled in it (1 Tim. 1:15): “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all.” Jesus came to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10; 5:32). Note three things:

A. It is God who saves us.

God the Father took the initiative in eternity past. He sent His Son at the proper time (Gal. 4:4). The Holy Spirit applies God’s salvation through the new birth (John 3:6-8). It is all God’s doing. As Jonah (2:9b) affirms, “Salvation is from the Lord.”
As I’ve often said, salvation is a radical word. You don’t need saving if you’re in pretty good shape. All you need then is a little help. You need saving when you’re perishing and are helpless to save yourself. The Bible uses a number of metaphors to show that we are desperately helpless and unable to save ourselves. It says that we were dead in our sins (Eph. 2:1; John 11). It pictures us as blind (John 9; 2 Cor. 4:4), lost (Luke 15), leprous (Luke 5:12-14), crippled (Luke 5:18-25), deaf (Mark 7:31-35), and hardened in our hearts (Eph. 4:18). Salvation means that God came to us while we were His sinful enemies (Rom. 5:8, 10), rescued us from our helpless condition, and gave us new life as His free gift. As William Hendriksen put it (New Testament Commentary, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus [Baker], p. 232), “God has delivered us from the greatest of all evils and he has placed us in possession of the greatest of all blessings.”

But here is where much controversy arises. Many will say, “It’s true that God saves us, but the sinner has to exercise his free will in order to accept God’s gift.” In other words, God has done His part by sending Christ to die for our sins, but now it’s up to us to accept Him. Implicit in this teaching is that everyone has the ability to believe in Christ. Without such ability, they say, God’s offer of salvation is a sham. What good is it to tell a sinner to trust in Christ if he is not able to trust in Christ?

Several things need to be said here. First, sinners must repent and trust in Christ to be saved. Christ commands sinners to repent and believe the gospel (Mark 1:15). But the command does not imply ability. Jesus plainly said (John 6:44, 65), “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day…. For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father.” Clearly, the Father does not draw everyone to Christ, because Jesus promises to raise up on the last day all who come to Him through the Father’s drawing. But not all will be saved.

Jesus said (Luke 10:22), “All things have been handed over to Me by My Father, and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, and who the Father is except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him.” Clearly, Jesus does not will to reveal the Father to everyone. When the disciples asked Jesus why He spoke to the multitudes in parables, He replied (Matt. 13:11), “To
you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted.”

In John 8:43, 44, Jesus asked the unbelieving Jews, “Why do you not understand what I am saying? It is because you cannot hear My word. You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father...” Jesus did not say, “It is because you chose by your free will not to hear My word,” but rather, “because you cannot hear My word.” Because they were not born again, they were of their father the devil, and they acted in accordance with their nature.

If we had time, I could multiply verses that say the same thing (e.g., Rom. 8:7-8; 1 Cor. 2:14; 2 Cor. 4:4; Eph. 2:1-3; 4:17-18). So to speak of “free will” is really misleading. As Martin Luther correctly argued against Erasmus (The Bondage of the Will), the fallen human will (before conversion) is in bondage to sin. Or, as Charles Wesley put it (“And Can it Be?”), “Long my imprisoned spirit lay, fast bound in sin and nature’s night...” God has to send that quickening (life-giving) ray to awaken us from our darkness, death, and bondage. At that instant, we respond in faith and repentance, which also come from God. It is God who saves us.

B. God saves us apart from our works.

This is a frequent theme in Paul. He writes (Eph. 2:8-9), “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.” (See also, Titus 3:5.) If we could take any credit for our salvation, we would do it (1 Cor. 1:26-31). But we can’t because the whole thing, including repentance and faith, are God’s gift (Acts 5:31; 11:18; Phil. 1:29; 2 Tim. 2:25; Heb. 12:2). We are saved unto good works (Eph. 2:10), and unto holiness. But these things are the result of salvation. They have no part in causing salvation.

C. God saves us in accordance with His purpose and grace.

Paul roots our salvation not in anything that we can do, but rather in something that God purposed from all eternity. But God not only purposed it from all eternity, He also granted it from all eternity! This means that in one sense, we were saved before the universe existed! Of course, we did not exist then, and God must
apply His salvation to us at a point in time. But if you have been saved, God had you personally in mind in His eternal purpose.

In words similar to our text, Paul writes (Eph. 1:4-6), “just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.” A few verses later (1:11) he adds, “In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will.”

The Bible is clear that God has an eternal purpose. If He did not have a purpose, He would not be wise. If we grant that a human builder must have a plan before he starts to build, then why should we not agree that an all-wise God has a predetermined plan for His creation? Predestination is the means by which God accomplishes His predetermined plan.

Also, our text shows that God’s eternal plan concerns promoting His glory through our salvation. His purpose is “to the praise of the glory of His grace.” He also will be glorified in the just condemnation of the wicked, who are responsible for their sin. But, rather than leaving everyone to receive the just penalty of their sins, God determined to save some, whom the Bible calls the elect.

Furthermore, God is fully capable of achieving His eternal purpose to save His elect. Again, there is controversy and confusion over this point. Some argue that because God desires all men to be saved (1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Pet. 3:9; Ezek. 18:32), therefore He has done all that He can do to save sinners. But their actual salvation rests on their free choice to believe in Christ. They picture God as anxiously sitting on the edge of heaven, wishing that He could save everyone. But, alas, He is limited by man’s stubborn will!

In fact, Dave Hunt (What Love is This? [Loyal], pp. 111-112, 113-114) argues that if God could save everyone, but chose only to save some, then He is immoral and unjust. He compares this to someone who could save a drowning man, but chose not to. That is a blasphemous argument! It portrays God as held captive by man’s fallen, sinful will. God wishes that He could save everyone,
but man’s will is sovereign over God’s will. God must be relieved that at least some decide to choose Him. It really would have been a bummer for God to put His Son on the cross if nobody actually decided to get saved! What a pitiful view of God!

In Romans 9, Paul raises the question of God being unjust because He chooses Jacob and rejects Esau before they were born. He did it “so that God’s purpose according to His choice would stand, not because of works but because of Him who calls” (Rom. 9:11). God made the choice and He was not unjust to do it (9:14). Then Paul cites God’s self-revelation to Moses. When Moses asked to see God’s glory, here is God’s reply: “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion” (Rom. 9:15, citing Exod. 33:19). Paul concludes (9:18), “So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires.” He did not say, “He has mercy on whoever chooses Him and He hardens whoever rejects Him.”

If you object, “But that’s not fair, because if God determines who will be saved, then no one can resist His will,” keep reading. Paul raises that objection (9:19) and answers it like this: “On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God?” He goes on to argue that the potter has the right to do with the clay whatever he chooses. God has the sovereign right and the ability to save whoever He chooses, in accordance with His purpose.

I used to fight with those verses, thinking that I was fighting with Paul. Then one day, God tapped me rather forcefully on the shoulder and said, “You’re not fighting with Paul. You’re fighting with Me. I gave you a clear answer to your question about fairness, but you don’t like the answer!” I realized that like Job (40:1), I had been contending with the Almighty. With Job (42:2, 6), I confessed, “I know that You can do all things, and that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted.... Therefore I retract, and I repent in dust and ashes.” I realized that if I was going to believe God’s Word, I had to submit to what Paul was clearly teaching. I had to be willing to let God be God, the sovereign of the universe, who acts freely to accomplish His purpose according to His grace. If you don’t submit to this teaching, you really don’t understand the gospel very well at all. The gospel is all about God’s saving sinners according to His purpose and grace.
2. **God’s salvation calls us with a holy calling.**

One common objection to the view that salvation is totally by God’s grace is that such teaching will lead to licentiousness. The charge was leveled against Paul (Rom. 3:8; 6:1). But he always made it clear that God calls us to live holy lives. If someone claims to be saved but continues living in sin, he had better examine whether he was truly saved at all. Salvation that does not result in a life of progressive holiness is not genuine salvation. It dishonors the name of God when someone claims to be saved, especially someone in public ministry, but he lives in sin. While no one can be totally free from sin in this life, those whom God has saved will sin less as they grow in holiness in thought, word, and deed.

God’s call to holiness is effectual, which is to say, it is something that He purposes and promises to accomplish in us. Yet at the same time, we must actively strive for holiness according to the means that God has provided. As to the effectual nature of this call, note Romans 8:28-30:

> And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the [lit.] called according to His purpose. For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified.

God’s call predestines us to be conformed to the image of His Son, who is holy. Or, as we saw in Ephesians 1:4, He chose us so “that we would be holy and blameless before Him.” While God foreordained that we would be holy, this does not imply that we are passive in the process. We must “work out [our] salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in [us], both to will and to work for His good pleasure” (Phil. 2:12-13). We must strive against sin (Heb. 12:4).

**Conclusion**

Maybe you’re still wondering, “What is the practical benefit of any of this?” First, in the context of our text, knowing that God purposed your salvation from all eternity will give you the strength
to endure trials, especially the trials that come in serving Him. We just read Romans 8:28, which promises that if you are one of the called according to His purpose, then He will work all things together for your ultimate good. As we’ll see in verse 10, even death is under His sovereign control.

Second, knowing that God purposed your salvation from all eternity will give you assurance that He will finish what He began. As Paul put it (Phil. 1:6), “For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.” Third, it will motivate you to grow in holiness. There are many more practical benefits, such as humility (1 Cor. 1:26-31) and confidence in witnessing (Acts 4:27-31; 18:9-11; 2 Tim. 2:10). But, I’m out of time!

Application Questions

1. Some say that predestination is simply God’s foreknowledge of who will choose Him. Why is that inadequate and incorrect?

2. Why is the doctrine of God’s sovereignty in salvation not just an academic debate? Why is it vitally important?

3. Some argue that if God is absolutely sovereign, it robs men of free will. Your response?

4. If God’s calling to holiness is effectual, why must we be involved in the process? Why isn’t it automatic?

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