



In his book, *Thoughts for Young Men*, the 19th century preacher J. C. Ryle shares a story told by the British Bible commentator Matthew Henry about Sir Francis Walsingham, who was Queen Elizabeth I's principal secretary in charge of intelligence.

In his old age, he retired from public life and gave himself to serious thought. Some of his former friends came to visit and told him he was becoming melancholy.

*"No," he replied, "I am serious; for all are serious round about me. God is serious in observing us; Christ is serious in interceding for us; the Spirit is serious in striving with us; the truths of God are serious; our spiritual enemies are serious in their endeavors to ruin us; poor lost sinners are serious in hell; and why then should not you and I be serious too?"*¹

Paul was serious when he wrote his final letter to Timothy. After expressing his affection for Timothy and affirming his "sincere faith" (v. 5), Paul calls Timothy to action, saying, "For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you..., for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control" (2 Tim. 1:6-7).

That's a motivating verse, isn't it? It sets forth a positive image of a Spirit-empowered life. *But how do we know if that's our life?* Based on what Paul says in the next set of verses, "the test of our power comes when we must suffer for the gospel."² In vv. 8-14, Paul says,

⁸ Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God, ⁹ who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, ¹⁰ and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel, ¹¹ for which I was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher, ¹² which is why I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that day what has been entrusted to me. ¹³ Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. ¹⁴ By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you.

- 2 Timothy 1:8-14

The gospel has always involved suffering. The very **content** of the gospel is that "Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to

¹ J. C. Ryle, *Thoughts for Young Men: An Exhortation Directed to Those in the Prime of Life*, lightly edited and updated by Mary Davis (Leyland, UK: EP Books, 2018, reprinted 2021), 39-40.

² R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus, and to Philemon*. Commentary on the New Testament, Hendrickson Publishers, Inc. edition (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), 759.

God. He was put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit” (1 Peter 3:18). Peter wrote these words to encourage believers who were suffering for the gospel. Peter went on to say, “don’t be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you” (1 Pet. 4:12).

Believers shouldn’t be surprised when they take flak for being Christians, because suffering is included not only in the *content* of the gospel but also in the *call* of Christ to salvation. Right after Jesus predicted the suffering and death that he would undergo as the Messiah, “he said to all, ‘If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?’” (Luke 9:23-25).

Yesterday I had a Zoom call with a young lady who has been to our church and wanted to talk about her relationship with God and getting baptized. She had grown up in a Christian home, but during her senior year in high school and on into her college years, she began to question and examine her faith. After a few years of wrestling through this process, she came to see that “reclaiming her faith” required a realignment of her life.

She said, “The habit of dying to myself every day is the most painful, excruciating part of being a Christian...” She said, “I get up in the morning, and I’ve got my worship music going, and I’m praying to God and can sense his presence. But after I get up and worship, I go out and get overwhelmed by so many things that contradict the very principles, the very Person, I’m trying to live for.” The “things” that inundate her are the influence of her non-Christian friends, secular ideologies that oppose the truth of God, and her own sinful desires (“the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life” – 1 John 2:16).

Do you ever feel that way? If you’re a Christian, of course you do. Paul described this as being his own struggle – and that of every other believer (Rom. 7; Eph. 6; et al.).

This young lady is learning to lean on Jesus! Mark well her full statement (which I wrote down): “The habit of dying to yourself every day is the most painful, excruciating part of being a Christian, *but it is very worth it at the end of the day.*”

This young lady has come to understand the call of Christ upon her life. The gospel is a call for self-denial, not self-fulfillment. The cross was an instrument of death, and Jesus says it’s to be taken up “daily.” When we grasp that truth and desire to live accordingly, Paul’s words to Timothy can be of tremendous benefit to us. Paul’s main point is this:

***God’s sovereign, saving grace
makes the gospel worth suffering for.***

This is the transformative truth, the life-changing principle, Paul lays out before us. He drives it home with his exhortations to Timothy, his explanation of the gospel, and his own personal example.

**Exhortations
(vv. 8, 13-14)**

Paul's exhortations serve as bookends of this section. He begins with two exhortations and closes with two more.

The first two exhortations appear in verse 8: "Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God." Do you see the two exhortations? One is negative, the other positive, and they're coupled together: "Do not be ashamed ... but share in suffering for the gospel...."

Do not be ashamed: The mood of the verb does not suggest that Timothy was ashamed and needed to stop. Rather, it implies that Timothy is not ashamed and wouldn't be.³ It's a word of exhortation, not rebuke. If Paul had been there in person, the conversation might have gone something like this:

Paul: "Don't be ashamed!"

Timothy: "I won't be!"

Paul: "I know you won't!"

There were two things in particular Timothy wasn't to be ashamed of. The first was "the testimony about our Lord," i.e., the gospel message itself. Picture Timothy in the world-class city of Ephesus, "the mother city" of Asia. It was at the crossroads of major trade routes and had a population of a quarter-million. Its temple for the Greek goddess Artemis (known in Rome as Diana), which was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The temple was not only a religious center, but it also functioned as the primary banking institution. The image of Artemis was featured on coinage, and there was a month named for her, as well as athletic games. She was the guardian and protector of the city.

Yet the gospel centered on a poor Jewish carpenter who was crucified. Crucifixion was the lowest, most degrading form of execution given to a criminal. *What kind of a Savior is that, compared to the greatness of Artemis?* There were those in Ephesus, who, like the Corinthians, thought the cross was foolishness. In fact, one of the earliest depictions of the crucifixion of Jesus is The Alexamenos Graffito, an image that was scratched into a plaster wall near the Palatine Hill in Rome sometime between 50-200 A.D.

It shows a young man worshipping a crucified, donkey-headed figure. The Greek inscription translated reads, "Alexamenos worships [his] god." Clearly, the image was meant to mock a Christian named Alexamenos.

No wonder there was an uproar when Paul preached the gospel in Ephesus and people started abandoning their idols and following Christ! Who would've thought! "The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Cor. 1:18). Paul declared in Romans 1:16, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes..." Paul said, "I am not ashamed," and he tells Timothy, "Don't you be ashamed."

"Do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner" (v. 8). Many were mocking not only the gospel message but also the messenger. Paul, like Jesus, was being treated as a criminal. We can see his opponents in Ephesus taunting Timothy,

³ The verb ἐπαισχυνθήσῃς (epaischynthēs) is aorist subjunctive rather than present imperative.

saying, “See what happened to your mentor? Do you want that to happen to you, too?” John Calvin in his commentary pictures the enemies of the gospel saying, “Why do you press upon us a doctrine which you see is hissed at by the whole world?”⁴

Oftentimes, cowardly believers refuse to associate with their brothers and sisters who are taking a stand for Christ. This can happen in a school, where a student takes a stand for Christ while other “Christians” show little or no support. It can happen on a sports team when a player refuses to take part in sinful postgame activities, and other believers bail on him to have a little fun. It can happen on a business trip when a Christian employee refuses to join in the excessive drinking, the crude conversations, the immoral activities.⁵

Paul paid a high price for following Christ. It landed him in prison, but Paul wasn’t Caesar’s prisoner, he was the Lord’s prisoner. And that was nothing to be ashamed of.

So, Paul issues Timothy an invitation: “Join with me in suffering for the gospel” (v. 8 NIV). “**Share in suffering for the gospel**” (v. 8). That’s the second exhortation. Timothy was able to do this based on what Paul says at the very beginning and very end of verse 8. Paul begins by saying, “*Therefore*, do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner.” Whenever you see the word “therefore,” find out what it’s *there for*. The basis of Paul’s exhortation is the truth he declared in the previous verse: “God has given us a spirit not of fear, but of power...” Paul reiterates this truth at the end of verse 8: “share in suffering for the gospel *by the power of God*” (v. 8b).

The Spirit of God gives the people of God the power of God to suffer for the gospel of God. Paul sandwiches the first two exhortations in between these statements regarding God’s power because he knows our tendency is to rely on our own strength or will power rather than God’s power. When we do, we’ll falter and fail. We’ll cave in and compromise. I thought of the third stanza of that old hymn, *Stand Up, Stand Up, for Jesus: Stand up, stand up for Jesus, stand in his strength alone. / The arm of flesh will fail you, you dare not trust your own*. But those who rely on the Lord will discover that God will never let them down.

The last two exhortations, which appear in verses 13-14, tell us *how* we show that we are not ashamed of the gospel but are willing to suffer for the gospel. We do it by *proclaiming* the gospel and by *protecting* the gospel.

Proclaim the gospel: “Follow the pattern of the sound words [wholesome teaching] that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 1:13). In Romans 6:17, Paul writes to believers, “But thanks be to God, that though you used to be slaves to sin, you have come to obey from your heart the pattern of teaching that has now claimed your allegiance” (NIV). These Scriptures indicate that the truth of God is to be not only believed, but also embraced. If we *love* it, we’ll *live* it. We’ll proclaim the gospel with our and our lives. One of my former seminary professors likes to say, “Your walk gives credibility to your talk, and your talk gives clarity to your walk.” This morning another Christian brother texted me a quote from Dillon Burroughs, who said, “Be willing to be unliked and ridiculed in order to speak the words of the One who matters most.”

⁴ John Calvin, “Commentaries on the Second Epistle to Timothy.” *Calvin’s Commentaries*, vol. 21 (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), 193.

⁵ David Platt, *Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary: Exalting Jesus in 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus*, edited by David Platt, Daniel L. Akin, and Tony Merida (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2013), 149.

Protect the gospel: “By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you” (2 Tim. 1:14). The authors of the book, *The Archer and the Arrow*, illustrate the sacred trust of guarding the gospel with the Mona Lisa painting, which has an insurance valuation of \$1 billion. This famous painting resides in a bullet-proof case in the Louvre, the national art museum in Paris. The painting is considered so valuable, that it has been exhibited outside the Louvre on only two occasions in the last century. Can you imagine what might have happened if those responsible for delivering the painting decided that the Mona Lisa was a little short in artistic merit? What if they had whipped out a brush in transit and tried to improve the painting by adding some touches of their own? The authors rightly say, “Their job was not to improve the painting, but to deliver it in its original condition. How much more the Word of God!”⁶

Yet many professors and seminaries, pastors and churches, try to improve what is already perfect and priceless. They twist God’s truth to make it more palatable to modern culture. Last week at our Reformation Society meeting, a pastor presented a paper that sounded the alarm against Progressive Christianity. He showed that this movement and its message is anything but Christian. It removes the cross, redefines biblical terms, and condones lifestyles that Scripture condemns. The pastor concluded his paper by reiterating that “progressive authority is not authoritative. Progressive morality is not moral. Progressive activism is inactive. Progressive love is not love. The progressive Jesus is not Jesus.”⁷

If you follow the real Jesus, the Jesus revealed through Scripture, you will be opposed. You will be ostracized. You will be criticized. You will be marginalized. But . . .

***God’s sovereign, saving grace
makes the gospel worth suffering for.***

So, don’t be ashamed of the gospel, but join in suffering for the gospel. Proclaim it and protect it by the power of God, by the Holy Spirit of God, who indwells you.

Explanation (vv. 9-10)

[God] saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, ¹⁰ and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

- 2 Timothy 1:9-10

These verses celebrate the greatness of God and the grace of God with respect to our salvation. God didn’t save us because of anything good in us but on account of his grace toward us – grace that he determined to show us before time began, and grace that he will continue to show us throughout all eternity.

⁶ Ibid., 155.

⁷ Aaron Kelley, “The Progressive Trilateral: Mapping Out Challenges to Evangelicalism from Progressive Christianity,” an unpublished paper presented to the Reformation Society of Western New York on April 11, 2024.

Many false gospels are built around the idea that if you are basically moral then God will save you. Yet Scripture says, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 3:23-24). God’s “purpose” established the plan of salvation, and his grace empowered the plan!

Through his death and resurrection, Jesus “abolished” death. The Greek word translated “abolished” is *katargeo*. It means “to render inoperative.” It doesn’t mean that death no longer exists, but that it’s no longer a viable enemy. Just before Dietrich Bonhoeffer was executed, he held a worship service for his fellow prisoners. He preached on Isaiah 53 and 1 Peter 1:3: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” After Bonhoeffer closed in prayer, two men came and told Bonhoeffer to come with them. The prisoners knew what was next: the scaffold. Bonhoeffer told his friend, “This is the end. For me the beginning of life.”⁸

But notice what Paul says in 2 Timothy 1:10: Jesus brings “life *and* immortality to light through the gospel.” “Life” speaks of “regeneration” (new life). “Immortality” speaks of resurrection (never-ending life).

In an article titled, “Will I Suffer More If I Follow Jesus?” John Piper writes, “The moment that we are born again, that we become Christians – *that very moment* –

- The burden of guilt in that very moment is lifted from our conscience with every sin forgiven.
- The wrath of God in that moment is taken away from us, removed.
- The Holy Spirit is poured into our lives, shedding abroad in our hearts the love of God (Romans 5:5).
- The friendship of the King of the universe is ours.
- Intimate fellowship with Christ begins.
- Bold communication in prayer is open.
- “Joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory” is tasted (1 Peter 1:8).
- All bondages of sin are broken.
- Invincible hope is awakened.
- The omnipotence of God shifts from being against us to working everything together for our eternal good (Romans 8:28).

This is a short list – the tip of the iceberg of all the gospel blessings we have in Christ!

***God’s sovereign, saving grace
makes the gospel worth suffering for.***

Having explained the worth of the gospel, Paul relates it to his own experience.

**Experience
(vv. 11-12)**

⁸ Metaxas, Bonhoeffer, 527-528. Cited in Platt, CCEC, 152.

“For which I was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher, which is why I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that day what has been entrusted to me” (2 Tim. 1:11-12).

The Greek word for “guard” (*phulasso*) is a military term used of a soldier on a watch, who was accountable with his own life to protect that which was entrusted to his care. Even as Paul guarded the gospel, he knew that Jesus was the ultimate Guardian and would give Paul the power necessary to fulfill his calling as a preacher, apostle, and teacher – one sent by God to preach and teach the message about God.

Paul was an apostle in the proper, official sense of the word in that he was an eye-witness of the resurrected Christ and wrote actual Scripture as he was carried along by the Holy Spirit. But every believer has the privilege to suffer for the gospel. In his letter to the believers in Philippi, Paul wrote, “It has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him” (Phil. 1:21). Paul’s language in that verse indicates that suffering for Jesus is a gift, a privilege, something that has been “granted” to us.

Yes! That is precisely the case, and that’s what Paul is pressing home to Timothy in this first chapter of Paul’s final letter to him. This is God’s word to us.

Conclusion

Let me close by sharing with you one other example of faithful believers who lived and died knowing and showing that God’s sovereign, saving grace makes the gospel worth suffering for.

A little over ninety years ago, a young Christian lady named Elisabeth Scott went to a Bible conference, where she was deeply moved by the words of Paul in Philippians 1:21, “For me to live is Christ and to die is gain.” So, right after college, she enrolled at Moody Bible Institute to prepare for the mission field. A year later a young man named John Stam showed up at Moody for the same purpose. They met, fell in love, and went with China Inland mission to spread the gospel in Anhui Province. They were married in October of 1933, and in September of 1934, their daughter Helen was born.

Three months after that, the Stams were assigned to a mission station in the small village of Jingde (Ching-te). It was known that there was Communist activity nearby, but the mission leaders and the local magistrate of the town felt that they were safe.

Yet early one morning, just two weeks later, Chinese Red Army soldiers burst through the locked gate, into the courtyard of the mission station. Without fear, John welcomed them into their home, where Betty served them tea and biscuits. John was then bound and taken to a local house prison. Later that same morning, Betty and Helen were taken to be with John in the prison. Amid all the hustle and bustle, baby Helen started crying. The soldiers talked of killing her. Then one of the prisoners who had just been released asked why they would kill an innocent baby. The soldiers turned to him and asked if he was willing to die for this foreign baby. He said, “I am willing,” so the soldiers hacked him to pieces in front of the Stams.

The next morning the Stams were forced to march 12 miles to the town of Miaoshou (meow-show). The family was thrust into a mud hut to spend the night. After tending to her daughter, Betty hid her by bundling her up in a pile of heavy winter bedding. The next morning, as their daughter was hidden and sound asleep, soldiers marched John and Betty through the streets of Miaoshou and out to a little hill to be executed.⁹ According to one biographer, they exchanged a few words and were ordered to kneel. In quick succession, they were beheaded. First John, then Betty. Both were 27 years old.

They had gone to China to bear witness to the gospel of Jesus. They knew the calling was hazardous. They figured they had an important message to give – so important, that it was worth risking everything.

So, did the Stams waste their lives? Couldn't they have been more effectively used elsewhere, instead of being cut down at age 27, before their ministry got off the ground? As news of their death began to spread, one of their fellow missionaries in China wrote,

Their lives, their work, their witnessing are known in every town and every city of our region. A life which had the longest span of years might not have been able to do one hundredth of the work for Christ which they have done in a day. They were more fruitful in their deaths than they ever could have been in their lives.

Ninety years later, the word of God is prevailing in China! The Stams' death propelled gospel labors well *beyond* China. Their martyrdom was hugely motivational in mobilizing a whole generation of young people, including Jim Eliot, who was martyred twenty-two years later, while bearing witness to the Auca Indians in South America. Eliot famously said, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." The apostle Paul and Christ himself would applaud such a statement.

***God's sovereign, saving grace
makes the gospel worth suffering for.***

God may not call you to die in one day like John and Betty Stam, or Jim Eliot. Maybe God is calling you to a lifetime of gospel fidelity – decades of denying yourself daily and serving others sacrificially for God's glory. Kind of like when Paul said: "I die every day," or when Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."

I know that the story of martyrs sound a bit extreme and far removed from our own life experiences – the day-to-day trials we face here in upstate NY. But the gospel is about the Son of God who laid down his life to win the salvation of his people. So, is there anything he can't ask of you? Anything he *is* asking of you that you're unwilling to do?¹⁰

⁹ "Murders of John and Betty Stam," *Wikipedia* [online]. Curious onlookers lined both sides of the streets. A Chinese shopkeeper stepped out of the crowd and talked to the Communists, trying to persuade them not to kill the Stams. The soldiers ordered the man back into the crowd, but he wouldn't step back. The soldiers then invaded his house where they found a Chinese copy of the Bible and a hymnbook. He was led alongside the Stams to be executed for being a Christian.

¹⁰ The three paragraphs preceding this footnote, not including the "Transformative Truth," are taken almost verbatim from John Folmar's sermon, "Believe in the Light," based on John 12:12-36, on April 14, 2024 [online]. Retrieved on 20 April 2024 from <https://www.eccdubai.org/sermons/sermon/2024-04-14/believe-in-the-light?defaultaudio>; Internet.