

Suffer Together for the Gospel

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We're seeking to be bound together in divided times, and not to retreat from the world but to bless it. How? The thesis of our entire passage: [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](#). *Share* in suffering. Bind together, why, to spread good news in a time of awful news. This gospel is so good it compels us to suffer together to bless the world. And yet we're often reluctant to aren't we? Why? Let's consider three reasons.

Ashamed of the Church

One reason a person might avoid suffering for the message of the church is *the shameful state of the church*: sexual assault headlines, moral failure of leaders, assault on US capitol. Maybe the reason you attend infrequently is you're embarrassed of the church. Someone recently wrote me and asked—Why do Christians inflict so much pain on one another?—confessing this has kept him from attending church. How should we respond to the failure of the church? **First**, *we shouldn't be surprised*. Wherever sinners gather there is failure: Congress, the Capitol, the Church. No one lives up to their ideals. Observing history historian CV Wedgewood said, ["the best of men do not consistently live on the highest plane of virtue, and most men live far below it."](#) We're all cut from crooked timber, Kant. Even St. Paul confesses: *I do the very thing I desire not to do*. **But** there is a significant difference between caving into Kant and going the way of Paul, between hypocrisy and humility. A hypocrite says one thing and does another. Believes this but lives that. The true Church, however, is a community that believes one thing and fights *not* to do another. Paul says, I do the thing that I *desire not to do*. His earnest desire is for his life and beliefs to align, which is why he says we are [saved and called to a holy calling](#) (9). Not just saved by faith in Christ but called to a holy calling. Holiness isn't just a destination; it's a deliberate striving to make the life of Christ our own. Something hypocrites are indifferent to. Now, you might recognize the distinction between hypocrisy and humility and still choose to disassociate from the church, but the author of that email reveals a flaw in that decision. He said, "I've got too much self-righteousness to come to church." I'm better than that lot. Do you see what he's acknowledged? Exchanged unrighteousness in the church for self-

righteous apart from the church. It's not any better; in fact, it's worse. Because his crookedness keeps him from suffering for the good news everyone needs. What we need is a community that doesn't allow big differences or sins to divide but rather us to unite us in making the life of Christ our own together. Saved to a holy calling. Suffering for the gospel.

Alternate Lives

A second reason we may be unwilling to suffer for the gospel is because *we're busy trying to live alternative lives*. Ever find yourself wondering: What if I took a different career? What if I had another partner? What if I lived in different city? Some of you spent half of COVID surfing the Net in search of these alternative lives. Psychologist Adam Phillips points out *this* is why modern people are so perpetually dissatisfied, and I might add, transient. We're always dreaming of an alternate life, a life in which we would no longer dream of alternative lives! We buy into what he describes as the myth of our *potential lives*, in which mourning and complaining feel like the realest things we do. Why? Because you're in constant pursuit of something you do not have. Now if you're living this way, how is it going to impact your *actual life*? Your commitments will be loose, your relationships fairly disposable, perpetually dissatisfied. So what do we do? Phillips says as a modern person you reject the next life (afterlife), then the better life and fuller life has to be in this one. If there is no promise of a place where life will be full, you've got to draw all fulfillment from this life, no matter the impact on relationships, career, stability. *It's a life bent on avoiding suffering in mad pursuit of alternative lives.* But Paul comes along and says he's an [apostle according to the promise of life](#) (1), eternal life does exist, and then insists *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* (10). He's saying the gospel offers, not just better, fuller in the next life, but in *this* life. Jesus abolishes, the word is exhausts, the one thing we're all afraid of, death, at the cross. His suffering was so deep, so profound and his power so great, he exhausted death, wore it out. How? Resurrection. Resurrection doesn't just exhaust death it overthrows it. He rolls the next life into this life. And that's why you find people like Betsie & Corrie ten Boom suffering in concentration camp thanking God for her forbidden Bible, that all the other women could hear her read the gospel. If Jesus has brought the next life into this life, we have every reason to renounce

alternative lives and live into resurrection life. Which means we'll suffer together to give away the gospel!

Social Cost

A third reason a person might not suffer for the gospel is *because of the social cost*. Paul writes to Timothy as a Roman prisoner. Like today, being incarcerated then carried a stigma. Associating with convicts cost you, restricted access to social privileges. So Paul knowingly says, don't be ashamed of the testimony of Jesus or me his prisoner. Why? **The gospel**, verses 9-10. The grace given to you before the ages, that has broken into this world, brings life and immortality. If you've got all that, who cares about the social cost. You've got a love, life, purpose, and that joy no society or person could ever give you. Why then do we refuse to mention Jesus name, pray in public, give God credit for things in our lives?

Kierkegaard tells a parable about a thinker who erects a great system of thought, one that encompasses the whole history of existence,, but when someone comes along to inspect his personal life they are astonished to discover that he himself does not live in this high-vaulted palace *but in a barn alongside it*. The deeper reason we don't suffer together for the gospel is because we're living in barns when we could be in a palace. We're not waking up, eating, living, laughing, and going to sleep in the palatial splendor of the gospel. Instead, we nod our head to that system of thought and then seek alternative lives, social acceptance, settling for a dingy barn when we could be enjoying the regal love of the Father. Do not be ashamed of the testimony of Jesus or of me his prisoner but suffer together for the gospel!

Power of God

How do I do that when the pull to self-righteousness is so strong? When I find alternative lives so tempting? When I want social acceptance? Paul's says: in the power of God. What's that? It's the entire section. The whole gospel palace: called, saved, life, light, immortality. But we have to decide to live there. Settle in. Get friendly with the neighbors. Ask them to help you unpack and put roots down in the gospel. City Groups, Sundays, Fight Clubs. The church. Suffering *together* for the gospel. Verse 9: he saved *us*; called *us*; gave *us* his resurrection life. It's a community project, suffering to get good news into a time of awful news. When I was in middle school, occasionally my father would pick me up in a dated, '79

dark blue, Dodge St. Regis. I'd climb into the car and bend down pretending to tie my shoes until my Dad pulled away from school. Then one day my Dad said, Jonathan what are you doing? I was wearing redwing boots. Why did I fake-tie my shoes? *Embarrassment*. I was ashamed of being seen in my dad's car, and that shame kept me from embracing scorn and being proud of my Dad, a strong, wise, loving, attentive, providing father. Has your shame kept you from being proud of your *heavenly* Father, from suffering for his gospel? It must have broken my father's heart when he realized I was fake-tying my shoelaces because I was ashamed. A father who strove to love, protect, and provide for his children. And do you know what? He did not reprimand me; he did not kick me out and make we walk home. He absorbed the sting of my rejection and kept loving me. And you heavenly Father has done the same for you. Church, God is calling you out of the barn and into the palace of his love. He has absorbed your sins and given you richer, deeper, resurrection life. Let's heed his call not only to live in the gospel *but to suffer for the gospel*.