

# SUNDAY ARTICLE

ST DAVID'S PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH ♦ 15 DECEMBER 2019



## Someone Needs to See You Suffer Well

*Marshall Segal*

Few things fortify the soul against Satan's deception like watching another Christian suffer with persevering faith.

When we watch others walk through the valley of the shadow of death with purpose and joy in God, through ups and downs, their faithfulness and endurance inspire fresh hopefulness and vigilance.

Elisabeth Elliot has been that kind of person for me (and countless others). She and her husband, Jim, married on the mission field in Ecuador in 1953. Just three years later, Jim was speared to death, along with four other men, by the Huaorani tribe he was trying to reach with the gospel. Elisabeth received the news while caring for their 10-month-old daughter, Valerie. She writes,

*God's presence with me was not Jim's presence. That was a terrible fact. God's presence did not change the terrible*

*fact that I was a widow...Jim's absence thrust me, forced me, hurried me to God, my hope and my only refuge. And I learned in that experience who God is. Who he is in a way I could never have known otherwise. (Suffering Is Never for Nothing, page 15)*

She married again after sixteen years, only to lose her second husband, Addison, less than four years later, to cancer. Some have suffered more, to be sure, but not most of us. And few have championed the precious good God can do through the terrible facts in our lives like Elisabeth did. Her testimony reminds me of another sufferer, the apostle Paul, who endured sorrow after sorrow with great joy and enduring faith.

### **Suffering Is Not a Detour**

Prison was no detour for Paul. While anyone, even Christians, might have been prone to pity him, he saw the startling potential in his imprisonment. The worst hardships, he knew, were often the greatest highways for the gospel. He writes, "I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me" – wrongfully arrested, incarcerated, and left for dead (Philippians 1:20) – "has really served to *advance* the gospel" (Philippians 1:12). The gospel did not *survive* his imprisonment, but prospered while he suffered – no, *because* he suffered.

None of us naturally responds this way to suffering. Unexpected turbulence in life does not *naturally* overflow in bright hope and selfless love. Apart from grace, suffering makes us impatient, selfish, and despairing. We withdraw, turn inward, and are less concerned with (or even aware of) the needs of others. We often cannot see beyond the darkness we feel.

But the grace of God goes to work to create the opposite impulses, *especially* in suffering. Suffering was not a distraction, inconvenience, or detour for Paul, but a breakthrough for what he cared most about: the spread of the gospel and the glory of Jesus.

### **Suffering Reveals What We Treasure**

How did the gospel run while Paul sat alone in a cell? He tells us in the next verse: "It has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ." (Philippians 1:13)

Suffering faithfully catalyses the gospel in at least two great ways. First, suffering reveals our purpose and treasure like comfort and security do not. Everyone knew Paul was in prison *for Christ* (Philippians 1:13). Many were only exposed to his love for Jesus because he was mistreated and confined. If he did not suffer, they would not have been so powerfully confronted with his joy and message. Many in the imperial guard, for instance, may have

never heard the gospel at all if Paul had not been locked away there.

Many will not be curious about the hope within us (1 Peter 3:15) unless we suffer something that requires hope (1 Peter 3:13). Satan may still believe that a thick fog of

*The gospel prospered because he suffered.*

suffering will obscure the faithfulness of God (Job 1:9-11), but faithful suffering brings His glory into greater, more compelling clarity. When you suffer, think about the people watching you suffer, and what they're learning about Jesus.

### Nothing Advances the Gospel Like Suffering

Suffering also catalyses the gospel by encouraging and emboldening other sufferers. Again, Paul says, "Most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear." (Philippians 1:14)

His enemies, in Jerusalem and in the spiritual realm, conspired to silence him in prison, but they could not stop, or even slow, the gospel. Their failed attempts to crush Paul's spirit and testimony only threw gas on the fire of his ministry. As he suffered well, others spoke more, and more boldly. Who might finally speak up for Jesus because they saw you joyfully suffer for Him?

Nothing advances the gospel like suffering. For those who love God, all things not only "work together for good" (Romans 8:28), but work together to perfectly display the wisdom, power, and love of God. Against all our worst fears and assumptions, suffering well actually *proves* the gospel's power over and over again, and spurs the spread of the gospel further and faster by inspiring boldness in others.

Don't assume your suffering is a detour. Suffering may hinder or even halt a hundred things in our lives, but God loves to use our griefs to magnify our small visions of him. And suffering makes the gospel run with a pace unknown in prosperity.

### Someone Needs to See You Suffer Well

As is often the case in God's Word, the words we may easily overlook in Philippians 1:12-14 might be the most instructive: "I want you to know..." Even while Paul suffered in extraordinary and horrible ways, he was more concerned for others' faith and joy in Jesus than he was for his circumstances.

Paul wanted others to know that God can be trusted, no matter what comes, that the gospel cannot and will not be suppressed, that Jesus really is worth everything we might suffer. He is not writing, even from prison, to garner their pity or sympathy, but to rouse and fortify their devotion. What if we suffered with eyes like his, seeing the remarkable opportunity to encourage and inspire other believers, especially those who are suffering?

Paul writes elsewhere, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. (2 Corinthians 1:3-4)

We don't know all of God's good purposes in suffering, but we do know that He uses our suffering to prepare us to comfort others. That means we often suffer, sometimes severely, in ways we don't understand now, because we haven't met the person who will one day be comforted by our story. Greater suffering requires greater comfort from God, which makes us greater comforters for others.

### Deepest Waters and Hottest Fires

After all Elisabeth Elliot lost and endured, she could say, *The deepest things that I have learned in my own life have come from the deepest suffering. And out of the deepest waters and the hottest fires have come the deepest things that I know about God. (Suffering Is Never for Nothing, page 9)*

When deep waters and hot fires come, I want to know God like she did – and I want to help others suffer great pain and loss with as much spiritual fruit and hope in God.

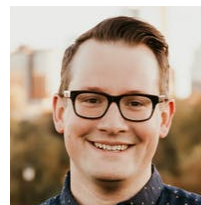
Elliot lost a husband to murder and another to cancer. Paul suffered imprisonment, slander, beatings, and worse. The severity of their suffering, however, does not make their suffering irrelevant to ours. Whatever suffering God brings – whatever pain, whatever disappointment, whatever trial, however big or small – we should want to be able to say with Paul, "It has become known to all that my suffering is for Christ."

We want others to finally meet Jesus because they saw Him in how patiently we responded to unexpected delays at work. We want a brother or sister in the Lord to press on because we kept praising the Lord when the car broke down again or the basement flooded. We want another believer to speak up about Jesus

because we shared with, and were rejected by, another neighbour. We want whatever we suffer, however big or small, to make God look more trustworthy and satisfying for anyone who might see how we suffer.

Someone needs to see you suffer well with Jesus. People need to see you clinging to His promises, treasuring His friendship, and praising His name when life is falling in on you. Some may not know how much they need to see you endure because their suffering hasn't come yet. But it will. And when it comes, they will remember the saints whom they have seen suffer well.

*We want whatever we suffer, however big or small, to make God look more trustworthy and satisfying...*



*Marshall Segal is a writer and managing editor at [desiringGod.org](https://www.desiringgod.org). He's the author of *Not Yet Married: The Pursuit of Joy in Singleness & Dating*. He graduated from *Bethlehem College & Seminary*. He and his wife, Faye, have a son and live in Minneapolis.*