

Most people believe that God is all about eliminating suffering, but Jesus suffered for preaching the gospel and he promised his followers will too, so we should learn to graciously accept the suffering that God allows in our lives as we strive to follow Jesus, who will ultimately turn our suffering to joy.

Introduction – Story of Antony Flew converting from zealous atheism to theism, and all the persecution he experienced from his former friends in the atheist and agnostic community. Theme for this passage (which records the calling of the Apostle Paul) is Acts 9:15-16. Paul was chosen by Jesus to be the apostle to the Gentiles and to *suffer* for Christ’s name.

I. From the world’s perspective, the gospel ultimately causes suffering

Recap Saul’s conversion experience, noting how the world explains “religious conversion” as subjective, psychological, and with no ultimate truth value.

A. Because it is an exclusive and intolerant message (vv. 20, 22, 29)

Saul, knowing that his mission has fundamentally changed, purposely abused his invitation to teach in the Jewish synagogue by preaching that Jesus is the only way to God. He knew very well that Jews don’t believe in Jesus, yet he zealously charged ahead with an exclusive and intolerant message in a completely inappropriate venue. He didn’t come to teach, but to argue that he was right and they were wrong.

B. Leading to persecution of unbelievers; persecution complex in believers (vv. 23-25, 29-30)

What did Saul expect would happen? Of course the Jews would object to him preaching that Jesus is the only way to be forgiven and to become a child of God! He wouldn’t relent in his persecution of their ancient traditions and beliefs until they retaliated by plotting to kill him. Such a response often creates a persecution complex in the original persecutor who is blind to his own intolerance.

C. Leading to mistrust and alienation (vv. 21-26)

Everyone (Christian and Jew) who heard Saul preach in the Damascus synagogue was astonished. They couldn’t figure out why the gospel was coming from Saul’s mouth. Didn’t he hate Christians and want to kill them? The gospel message deeply divided those who heard it—believers and unbelievers lost trust for each other and thus alienated each other by becoming enemies. Saul’s sudden and dramatic conversion also alienated him from many believers and all the unbelievers because they didn’t trust him—perhaps he would change his mind again and thereby betray them? Both crafty (e.g., his undercover escape from Damascus) and unstable, Saul is best left alone.

II. From God’s perspective, the gospel ultimately alleviates suffering

Note that the world correctly perceives that the gospel causes suffering, but the world’s explanation for this is wrong. Why is that the case? If the gospel is not true, then the world is correct. But if the gospel is true, then it is the only cure for suffering. Saul grasped this truth, and recognizing the depth of love shown to him in Christ he responded to his unique calling with unparalleled zeal, effort, and gratitude to God.

A. Because it announces forgiveness of sins (vv. 20, 22, 28-29)

Saul had friends in Damascus and Jerusalem because Christians forgave him. They agreed with his message! The gospel message Saul preached was that Jesus is God’s Son, the Christ, and therefore the chosen one through whom forgiveness of sins comes (Acts 13:38-39; 26:15-18; Eph 1:7; Col 1:13-14).

B. Leading to reconciliation with God (v. 31)

The Holy Spirit's work in the church is received as encouragement. When the gospel is believed, our suffering is framed in the bigger picture of being reconciled to God. God is not angry with his people! We are at peace with God, which gives us spiritual strength to endure our suffering by drawing on his love and grace. Saul, the chief of sinners, understood the value of being forgiven and loved by God. He believed the gospel reconciled even notorious sinners to God. God made his former enemies into friends! This restored relationship gave him personal peace in the midst of his personal suffering (Rom 5:1-11).

C. Leading to love of God and neighbor (vv. 20, 25, 27-28, 30-31)

Being forgiven of his sins and reconciled to God, Saul wasted no time fulfilling his calling to preach the gospel. In this way he loved God through obedience motivated by gratitude, and loved his neighbor by declaring to them Jesus as Lord and Savior of sinners. Although the Christians initially feared him, they rejoiced that God had changed Saul and so became his friends and followers. Barnabas especially modeled love of God and neighbor by vouching for Saul as a genuine brother in the Lord before the Jerusalem church. Out of love for God and their brother Saul, the Christians protected their gifted friend and safeguarded his special divine calling to the Gentiles by removing him from imminent danger.

III. The cross reveals how the gospel both causes and alleviates suffering

A. God in Christ forgave, therefore we are empowered to forgive others

God called Saul, the worst of sinners (1 Tim 1:15-16), out of darkness by forgiving him, changing him, and commissioning him. But it was risky and surely caused emotional suffering for Christians to forgive Saul and welcome him into the Church. He may have murdered some of their loved ones! Christians found the grace to forgive their former persecutor because Christ had first forgiven their sins (Col 3:13).

B. God in Christ suffered, therefore his suffering gives ours meaning

God the Father suffered by punishing at the cross his beloved Son who was sinless and did not deserve it, so that our sins might be forgiven (1 Cor 5:7b; Col 1:20; 2:13-14). God the Spirit suffered by withdrawing his presence from the Son, and by grieving over the Son becoming sin for us on the cross. God the Son suffered by dying for sinners who hated him (Rom 5:8), and by experiencing cosmic wrath and alienation from his Father on the cross (Mt 27:46; cf. Ps 22). Jesus as the incarnate Son of God suffered in every way for sinners so we could become his friends (Jn 15:13; 1 Pet 3:18). Since his suffering alleviates our suffering (Isa 53; 1 Pet 2:24-25), we may imitate him in sacrificial love for others (Rom 9:1-3; 1 Pet 2:20-23; 1 Jn 3:11-18) because he understands our suffering and is able to help us (Heb 2:17-18). Saul yearned to share Christ's sufferings, not because he enjoyed pain, but because he knew that suffering alongside Jesus meant he was loved by God (Phil 3:8-11).

C. God in Christ rose, therefore we know that our suffering will not last forever

God suffered and died at the cross, but Jesus did not stay dead. He rose from the dead three days later to new resurrection life (Mt 28:5-6). His resurrection proves he decisively defeated death and accomplished the forgiveness of sins (Lk 24:46-47; Heb 9:22; Rev 1:5). His resurrection reminds us that all who are united by faith to Jesus will likewise rise to resurrection life on the last day, when at last our spirit-empowered hearts will dwell in eternal bodies (Rom 8:10-11). Christ's resurrection guarantees to all God's children that our suffering will not last forever (1 Cor 15:54-58).

Conclusion – From the world's perspective, the gospel ultimately causes suffering and is therefore not worth the trouble of believing (much less sharing). The world is right about one thing: the gospel does lead to certain kinds of suffering. But the gospel is not just another expression of human religious experience. The gospel is true!