**The Call to Witness**

A Sermon by John Calvin

(Preached Sometime Between 1554-1555)

*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 world began.* (2 Timothy 1: 8-9)

May God bless the reading of his Word

God displays his **glory** and **majesty** in the **gospel** so that **all** may **worship** him. And yet, as we see from this passage, our **ingratitude** is such that we need to be **exhorted** not to be **ashamed** of the gospel. **Why**?

Because, even though God calls all creatures to **himself** that they might pay him **homage**, most refuse him, scorn him and even defy the very truth which was ***meant*** to make him known and worshipped!

So, although in our **willfulness** we **rebel** against our Creator, let us nevertheless remember the message of this text: We should **never** be ashamed of the gospel, because it is a *testimony about our Lord*.

We are to proclaim **all** that comes to us from God, to this one end: that He should be **known** and **glorified** as He deserves. If the gospel is not preached, Jesus Christ is **buried** as it were. We must always bear faithful witness to him, as he himself **testifies** in this text. Therefore, let us honor him by always remaining **true** to sound teaching.

Paul here draws attention to **himself**. **Not** because he wanted men’s approval, but because as soon as we separate ourselves from God’s **servants**, we may soon **find**, to our surprise, that we have separated ourselves from the God we **serve**.

When we see a minister of God’s word who is troubled and harassed and suffering persecution – we **may** be tempted to think that if we **abandon** him in his hour of need, we will only have failed a mortal man. But in **reality**, when we abandon God’s **minister**, God **himself** is wronged, because he who **suffers** bears the mark of the gospel. Therefore, to betray the **minister** of God is to betray **cause** of God. **That** is why **Paul** urges Timothy not to be ashamed of **him**.

It would have been **easy** in those days to mock Timothy by reminding him of Paul, his teacher. The wicked do just that, seeking to profit whenever God humbles his servants by allowing them to be unjustly afflicted and their followers to be persecuted. “See,” men cry, “see how it is!”

Timothy might have been badly shaken, which is why Paul says that although everyone reviles him, mocks him or loathes him, Timothy must not be moved. Paul is a prisoner of Jesus Christ. Paul is in essence saying: “*Let the world abuse me as it will. It is* ***not*** *for any wrong that* ***I*** *have done. God* ***acknowledges*** *my cause, which is also his. I suffer* ***not*** *for my* ***own*** *misdeeds but for having* ***defended*** *God’s truth. I am persecuted because I upheld God’s word and because I* ***continue*** *to uphold it. Pay no attention to the judgment of men, who are* ***nothing,*** *if not evil. It is enough for you to know that I am a hostage for the sake of God’s Son, and that he has given luster to my prison, so that although men may abhor it, it is honorable and noble before God and his angels*.”

Let us therefore learn not to rob Jesus Christ of the honor which we owe him, by shutting our mouths when we need to defend his honor and authority in his church. When also we see our brothers suffering for their faith in God, we should **unite** with them and **struggle** for their cause as **hard** as we can. Let us not be shaken by every passing storm, but let us stand firm, even though the devil seems to have a free hand and though all is chaos. Let us remain **steadfast** in purpose, since we are witnesses to the Son of God who **graciously** consents to use us in such an excellent work.

In the meantime, when we see people who are suffering, we should consider whether they are suffering for their **own sins** or for **God’s truth**. If we see someone who is **oppressed**, we ought not to **despise** him on that account. We should **not** be too hasty in such things, otherwise it is **God** we offend. We must be careful to ask **why** people are suffering. If we find that they have acted in all good conscience, and that they have been unfairly blamed and harassed because of their service to God, this **more** than **nullifies** whatever **men** may say against them.

Hence Paul goes on to say: *but share in suffering for the gospel.*

Now there is **no one** who would not like to be spared from having to suffer, for this is our natural instinct. And although we affirm, quite sincerely, that God is exceptionally gracious when he uses us to defend his cause, we would **all** dearly **love** to **escape** persecution.

We heap generous praise on those who take up the fight, and indeed, those martyred for the sake of Jesus Christ **deserve** to be **admired** and **honored**. Even so, who would not like to be out of harm’s way? Why? Because we forget the warning which Paul gives us here, that the **gospel involves suffering**. Jesus Christ, who in his own body endured crucifixion, wills that his message should be **inseparable** from **suffering**.

It would of course be good, if God should choose, that the gospel was accepted **without** opposition. Ah! But the Scripture must be fulfilled which says ‘*He will rule in the midst of his enemies***’** (Psa. 110: 2).

It is ordained that we come to him only after many conflicts, because the wicked rise up **against** God when he calls them to himself. The gospel therefore **cannot** come to us without affliction. Not that the fires of persecution are **always** lit, but by one means or another we **must** be tried. We must **all**, I say, fight under our Lord Jesus Christ.

Does not the man who would gladly run from the cross of Jesus Christ renounce his salvation? Where is there hope of life except in the redemption purchased by **his** sacrifice? The Son of God wills, then, that we be made **like** him, and that we be **transformed** according to **his image**. That being so, let us learn to accept **his** terms, since it is to **this** that he **calls** us, and since **this** is God’s **will**, as we have seen. We must therefore, without a word, bow our heads.

Here, then, are the steps by which Paul’s argument unfolds. We must not be ashamed of our brothers but must always side with them when the world curses and reviles them. For the gospel involves suffering, by which God is pleased to separate one man from another. **Not** that he does not call **all** to the unity of faith, for the gospel is the message of reconciliation. Nevertheless, the **faithful**, as we will later see, are drawn by the power of the Holy Spirit, while the **faithless** remain hardened.

So, the flame is lit, as when thunder builds up in the sky and heralds great disturbances. It is the same when the gospel is proclaimed. But if the gospel means affliction, if Jesus Christ wills that his members, too, should suffer as **he** did, is it **right** for **us** to refuse **his** terms?

Therefore, because the gospel is always about the hope of salvation and because our faith should rest upon it, let us remember Paul’s teaching, that we should reach out a hand to our brothers when they are abused and trodden down, when men spit in their face and treat them spitefully. Let us choose to be partners with them in suffering the world’s reproaches and wickedness, rather than be held in high repute while turning our backs on those who suffer for our common cause. **That** is what this passage tells us.

We ourselves are weak. We are afraid that, given the world’s power and the furious attacks of our enemies, we will be **crushed**. Paul therefore says that we will not be without God’s help and assistance, so that when he sends us into combat it is not to test our strength, but to arm and equip us with invincible power to endure.

Thus, Paul adds the phrase, *by the power of God*, in order to remove **any** excuse for sloth or lethargy.

Now as I said earlier, everyone would welcome an excuse for avoiding persecution. “*Oh*,” we might say, “*I would willingly suffer for God’s sake if he granted me that grace. That would be the highest honor I could have*.” We might all say this, while adding that we are weak, easily discouraged, terrified by tribulation and by the fury and cruelty of our enemies.

Having spoken in glowing terms about affliction, this is the kind of excuse we might make. But Paul **refuses** our excuse by promising that **God** can be relied on to strengthen us, and that it is **wrong** to think only of our **own** resources. Long before our enemies attack us, we’re already hiding from our own shadow! That much is sure. Apprehension makes us turn and run.

Knowing this to be our weakness, let us turn to the remedy. We must certainly consider our frailties and our reluctance to hold out against our enemies. But this should lead us to most humbly ask God for **his** help. Aware that we ourselves can do **nothing**, let us **humble** ourselves before him and **pray** that he might stretch out his hand. In time of utmost need, **he will not fail us**!

So even though we are conscious of our utter frailty, we may be at **peace**, knowing that God is preparing us for **whatever** happens and that we will be armed **whenever** he wants to put us to the test. This is the **proper** way for us to view our weakness. If we know our disability, we will come before **God** so that **he** may put it right as **he** knows is **best** for us. **That** is what we have to remember here.

If this truth were firmly planted in our hearts, we would not need much persuading to suffer affliction more readily than we do. Alas, there are very few who remember this lesson. Worse, it seems as if we stop our ears and close our eyes when mention is made of it. We **pretend** that we want God to strengthen us, but we are incapable of looking far enough ahead to that power of which Paul **speaks**. We do not think that we will succeed. Yet our Lord **assures** us that his power will **always** be given to us and that it is ours to **grasp**.

So, let not our weakness make us back away from the cross or from persecution, since God has undertaken to supply our needs. This is his **promise**, and he **will** do it.

Paul’s mention of God’s power is **not** made in **jest**. He points out that it is ready and prepared for believers when needed, if, that is, they **want** to be armed and equipped with it when the Son of God summons them to battle. Moreover, because we need to be **goaded** and **constantly** spurred on, Paul seeks to shame us if we lack the zeal to glorify Jesus Christ by suffering persecution, should that be his will.

He therefore reminds us that God saved us and called us with *a holy calling*. Since God has gone before us with his boundless grace, consider whether our thanklessness can be excused if we fail to respond to him. It was when we were lost and **damned** that God **rescued** us from the depths of hell. He brought salvation **to** us. If we turn our backs on him who treated us so generously, and if we fail to accept his offer of salvation, are we not irredeemably evil?

So, whereas Paul reproaches the **fainthearted** for failing to resist the enemy’s attacks, he seeks to instill into the **faithful** strong hope for the future by reminding them of what God has **already done** for them. God’s purpose in giving us a **token** of his goodness is that we should expect **more of the same**, as we wait for him to finish what he has begun. If he has saved us and called us with a holy calling, do we think that he will abandon us along the way? Since he has revealed our salvation to us and given us legs to walk and the gospel by which he calls us into his kingdom, since he has opened the door and is constantly at work, will he **mock** us by emptying his grace of its **effect**? Not at all! We can and we **must** **expect** him to bring his work to **completion**.

We should therefore walk boldly on, and since he has **already** put forth power on our behalf, we cannot doubt that he will **continue** in the future, giving us **full victory** over Satan and our enemies. And all the while we look to Jesus Christ, our head and our commander, to display the power given to him by God his Father, in which we too may share. That, then, is Paul’s meaning.

So, we see that God has in practice and in earnest testified that he will not fail us in time of need. Why? Because he has already saved us. When he called us to the gospel, what else did he do but redeem us when we were lost and perishing? **Has he**, then, **saved** us? We may therefore expect, since we are still on our way, that he will bring us to salvation. He has called us with a holy calling; that is, he has chosen us for himself, and has delivered us from the universal plight affecting all mankind. Since our Lord has rescued us, will he not hold us in his hand and guide us to the very end? Here we have sure proof of the power of God, who is always ready to help us when we place our trust in him, and when we recall the help we have had in the past.

The best use we can make of Paul’s teaching is to remember that, in granting us knowledge of his truth, God has already given us assurance that we have a heavenly inheritance, that we are **his** and are members of **his flock**. Once this is beyond any doubt, we will not hesitate to go steadily on, for we are under his protection. And because he is strong enough to overcome all our enemies, our salvation is secure. We need not fear our weaknesses; we may look to God to make up for them for he has **promised** us his help. We should think **deeply** about this, weigh it carefully and resolve to accept what this passage teaches. We need no long or wordy exhortation to fortify us against trials and temptations, as long as we are persuaded that our Lord will complete our salvation as he began it, by aiding us in time of persecution and by giving us the steadfastness to overcome, though in the world’s eyes we are like men trodden down and crushed.

We come back, however, to what Paul says about God’s holy calling and the salvation he has wrought. He declares that it was ***not*** *because of* ***our*** *works but because of* ***his own purpose and grace***. Here we are warned that our ingratitude will be all the **more** condemned because God has opened to us the priceless treasure of his grace. This was why he drew us to himself. How much **less** excuse, then, will we have if we betray our faith, since not only have we been bought by the blood of Jesus Christ his only Son, but he made **provision** for our salvation *before the world began*!

So, Paul condemns our thanklessness if, when God calls us to maintain a firm witness to his gospel, we prove unfaithful to him. Why? Because, as our text says, we are saved not by **our works** but by **God’s** purpose and grace.

To make his meaning plainer the apostle declares that this was given to us **before time began**, before, that is, the world came into being. But now all has been revealed by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. When our great Savior appeared, the grace which had previously been concealed was brought into the light of day. This was because the Son of God, as Paul says, *abolished death and brought life and immortality* (2 Tim. 1: 10). We do not need to run about in circles in order to find him: the gospel **leads** and **directs** us to him. So, when God sends us the message of salvation, all we have to do is accept the inheritance he promises; we do not need to travel very far, for God is already looking for us. All we need do is open our mouth so that he may fill it, and open our heart to the witness of the gospel; then the immortality of the heavenly kingdom will be ours. And although we are poor, frail vessels, full of corruption and decay, we may lay hold of this immortality, of which we receive assurance when we accept the grace offered to us in the gospel. These are the themes which Paul treats here.

Note, however, by way of further explanation, the word ‘*purpose’*. By **this** is meant God’s **eternal decree**, which has no discernible cause. For when we speak of God’s counsel, we should never argue about what it was that moved him, or try to find a reason, saying, “This is why God has acted like he did. This is what he had in mind.” On the **contrary**, God **demands** that we be sober and restrained, and that **his will** be all the reason we require.

When it is said, “God ordained it so”, we may be amazed and think it very strange, for we see no rational explanation. Even so we must make up our minds that his will is **just** and **irreproachable**. All our wisdom comes down to this: that whatever God ordains and does is **right**, though we cannot say why.

But because we are restless spirits and let our curiosity run wild, Paul seeks to **humble** our temerity by bringing us back to the **purposes of God**. We **must**, he says, consider that God has his **own** plans. We cannot fathom them or know what his motives are. There is no higher cause than his will, which is both **just** and **the standard** by which **all** justice is judged. We learn, then, that our salvation does **not depend** on any consideration of **our** merits. When God chose us for himself, he did not enquire what sort of people we were, or to what extent we were worthy. He had **his** purpose— that is, he did not seek the **reason** for our salvation outside of himself. Because the word ‘*purpose’* signifies God’s **decree**, Paul’s point is **clear**.

Since, however, we are arrogant enough to think that we possess merit of our own, we feel that it is only **right** that God should seek us out. So, to rule out **anything** that we might claim for ourselves, Paul writes *purpose* and *grace*. It is the same as saying ‘gratuitous purpose’, thus dismissing **all** our works and our stubborn belief that **we** possessed something of worth which led God to choose us. Observe, then, that God did not go outside of himself when he chose us for salvation. He saw only perdition in us, and thus contented himself with his grace alone and with his infinite mercy. He saw our wretchedness and determined to help us, notwithstanding our demerits.

To emphasize his point the apostle declares that God’s grace was given *before the world began*. This shows just how senseless people are when they try to flaunt themselves and imagine that salvation is **their** work, or that they have earned favor with God by **anticipating** his goodness! On what does our salvation depend? On God’s eternal election! God **chose** us before we ever existed. What could we have done at **that** point of time? Were we so clever or so well disposed that we could come to God? No, our salvation did not start when we reached the age of reason and discretion and began to have right feelings. It did not start then, but is grounded in God’s everlasting election, made *before the world began*. What could **we** have done? Could we have made our presence felt, or induced God to call us to himself and to set us apart from the rest of mankind? Are we not astonishingly **stupid** if we think that we are deserving, and if we exaggerate our merits so as to cloak God’s grace, imagining that they entitle us to come before him?

We see, then, what Paul is driving at when he speaks of grace given *before the world began*. We are duly warned that those who think that they can dispense with the doctrine of election are **really** intent on subverting our salvation. The devil has no better allies than those who deny the efficacy of the blood of Jesus Christ, who sow confusion, ruin the gospel and wipe from our minds all memory of God’s goodness. The devil has no better allies than those who oppose predestination, and who in their fiendish rage cannot bear to hear it spoken of and **preached** as it ought to be. If we detest and denounce the papists for profaning all of holy Scripture, for twisting and defiling the truth of the gospel and the worship of God, and for infecting the world with their superstitions and idolatries, how much more should we abhor those people who seek to blot out God’s election, and who by underhanded and crooked means want to stop it from being loudly proclaimed and clearly taught!

Where does our salvation lie if not in God’s election? Do we not want to hear the news that God of his free goodness has chosen a people for himself, without any other consideration? Do we not want so high and unfathomable a mystery to be made known, to the extent that God has revealed it to us? We surely conspire with Satan if it is found that Jesus Christ suffered in vain, that the passion he endured benefits no one, and that we are all lost and bound for hell!

This, therefore, is the first thing to bear in mind: if we dispense with God’s election, **there is no gospel to proclaim**; in its place is a spurious, **worldly** gospel— as taught by Mohammed— and both the church and Christianity cease to be. What would happen then? If we cannot accept this truth we will be making the Holy Spirit, who speaks to us here, a **liar**. So, let us be **constant** in our resolve to fight on, for this is the **foundation** of our salvation. How can we build, and how can we maintain the building, if the **foundation** is destroyed? Paul thus appeals to us by showing how bravely we must fight, how we may attain the inheritance so dearly won for us, and how we may enter into God’s glory and so complete the building we have begun. “*My friends*,” he says, “*we must rely on the grace which was given to us* ***not yesterday or today****, but from the* ***creation of the world****.* ***Today****, it is true, we hear God’s call, but his election has* ***gone******before****. He* ***chose*** *us without regard to our merits or to anything else we might claim, except our need of him. He drew us from the depths of hell where, miserable creatures that we were, we languished without hope. It is only right that we give him full obedience, for we are debtors to his goodness. His grace is all our joy*.” These are Paul’s words to us. We must, I say again, **keep** to this foundation if our salvation is not to crumble and disappear.

Think **lastly** of how useful this teaching is when we **apply** it to ourselves. Those who will not have a word said about election will protest: “*What’s this we hear? It’s all a waste of time! Why should we make any effort? God has already determined the outcome!*” These are people who have **never** tasted God’s goodness or the hope we have as Christians. They **barely** understand what it means to come to our Lord Jesus Christ. For if we do not know that we are saved **only** because God was pleased to **choose** **us** **before the world was made**, what sense can we make of Paul’s appeal to dedicate ourselves to God and to serve him gladly whether in life or death? How can we praise and magnify his name? How can we confess that our salvation is his work **alone**, and that he began it with no help from us? We might confess this with our lips, but it will only be a **sham**, unless we are convinced of the message which we have laid before you.

Let us therefore learn that the truth of God’s election, by which he has predestined us before the world began— that this truth, I say, must be preached **loud and clear**, however much the world opposes it. Not only that, but here we have a most important article of faith, without which we cannot consciously appreciate the boundless goodness of our God. For until this point is settled— that God chose us before ever we were born or could seek him out— we will have a **false** view of God’s mercy. Why? Because while we may **claim** to be redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ and to be **unworthy** of God’s great mercy, we will nevertheless think to ourselves, “*Who has a part and portion in the redemption provided by God in the person of his Son? Those who, wishing to be redeemed, seek after God and are obedient to him; who mean well, who are not too ignorant, who are good-natured and suitably devout*.”

Now when we mix in all these things and imagine that we are called to God and his grace because of something we possess, that we can bring an atom of our own and parcel out salvation between us and God, God’s grace is veiled and torn indeed to shreds. Such sacrilege is intolerable, which is why I said that we can **never** truly grasp God’s goodness until we face the issue of election. We must see that we are called **only** because our Lord chose to show us mercy before we ever were born.

**This** is the lesson we must learn. We must take it further, but we cannot do so now. It must keep till a future lesson.

*Now let us cast ourselves down before the face of our good God, acknowledging our faults and asking him to make us feel them more and more, so that, being brought to true repentance, we may forsake our evil desires. May he gather us to himself and, having chosen us out of the world, may he keep us always in his power and under his control. And may he so deliver us from this world’s corruption and defilement that we may fully give ourselves to serve and honor him.*