

“Tested Faith”
1 Peter 1:6-9
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3rd in Series, “Living Christianly in a non-Christian World”
Studies in 1 Peter

1 Peter 1:1-9

“Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to God's elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, ² who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood: Grace and peace be yours in abundance.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade--kept in heaven for you, ⁵ who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. ⁶

In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. ⁷ These have come so that your faith--of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire--may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. ⁸ Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, ⁹ for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.”

This past Wednesday night, Indian friends of ours working south of the capital city of Delhi, were attacked in the Christian school they are building to educate and evangelize the non-caste Indian children of that area.

Rohny Pakhuongte, now attending Denver Seminary and our church while they are in the States, forwarded the following e-mail to me from India.

“Last night under the cover of darkness, a group of unidentified persons show up in the school where we are working. They overpowered us and tied our hands at our back. As for

the headmaster, Mr. Sangte, his hands were tied in front. He dashed at the guy who was trying to attack him with a big knife. Mr. Sangte's younger sister, Miss Pari, also working as a teacher in the same school, was left untied. She picked up a broken iron rod lying on the floor and simply waved it around attempting to drive away the intruders. The intruders took some money and some goods before they made their escape. However, as they made their escape one of them fired a shot and hit Pari in the thigh."

It was clear from the spoken threats by the intruders and other threats that the headmaster has received over the past few weeks that the motivation for the attack was to intimidate the Christians and stop their work.

Miss Pari Sangte, the headmaster's sister, is in a Delhi hospital with a bullet in her leg because of her commitment to serving Christ and the "untouchables" of India.

Her co-workers reported that Miss Pari is one tough little woman; she didn't even cry.

Her own response was that she considers "it a privilege to be able to suffer for Christ."

We just heard the Apostle Peter say it this way: 2 Peter 1:6-7 "In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith--of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire--may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed."

Genuine Christianity conflicts with the culture.

It always has and, until Christ comes, it always will.

Jesus said in John 15:19, "If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you."

The conflict may be greater or lesser and it may be more overt or subtler, but there will be conflict between genuine Christians and the culture.

We don't like that because quite naturally we attempt to avoid discomfort, discrimination or pain.

The culture wars of the past few decades have certainly been due, in part, to everyone's desire to live in a culture that believes what they believe and values what they value.

I'd certainly rather live in America than in the Ayatollah's Iran.
 But as our own culture has changed, Christ-following Christians find themselves increasingly in the minority and in conflict.

By God's grace the conflict is not usually as overt or physical as what our Indian friends experienced last Wednesday or what Christians in many parts of the world are experiencing every day.

But the Bible says in 2 Timothy 3:12, "In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted..."

This is not an absolute - that every Christian will always be persecuted but a proverb that is generally true.
 And the persecution talked about here is not the grief that some Christians bring on themselves by being obnoxious.

But I ask you, have the words, "persecuted," "hated by the world," "suffer grief in all kinds of trials:" ever bothered you?

Those words certainly don't sound like the Christianity of Joel Osteen, Kenneth Copeland or other triumphalist preachers and purveyors of a prosperity gospel.

But those words are part of the Christianity of the Apostles Peter, Paul, and of Jesus.

It is the Christianity of the rest of the NT writers and of the church throughout the ages.

In fact that is why those words bother me, because I've never been shot in the leg for my faith and in fact I'd have a hard time describing my experience in our culture as "persecution."

Why is it that many of us don't live in conflict with the culture?

Is it because the culture is so Christian or because we are so unchristian?

It's not tough to swim downstream!

Don't misunderstand, the objective is not to have conflict; the goal is to live Christianly in a non-Christian world.

And Peter says that when you do that you may “suffer grief in all kinds of trials.”

I need to digress for a minute to tell you that when Peter says they will suffer, that they will suffer grief, and that they will suffer grief in all kinds of trials, he is not talking about colds, colitis or cancer, he is talking about conflict with the culture **because of** obedience to Jesus Christ.

Throughout the NT “suffering” is not a reference to sickness. Yes, when we are sick we suffer pain but that is not the “suffering” Peter or the other NT writers are talking about. They are talking about the pain we experience because of opposition to our faith by a culture in conflict with our Christianity.

Let’s not confuse our common maladies, distressing as they may be, with the subject of these verses. (For an excellent study of the various words for suffering, used in the Bible, see Peter H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, 30-44)

Looking again at Peter’s words it seems reasonable to ask three questions: “What are these “trials” that we may suffer, what do they result in and how are we to respond?”

When Peter’s words were first read, I suspect the readers knew what he was talking about.

They lived in a culture that was openly hostile to Christianity and it is easy to imagine that the price of following Jesus was usually high and obvious.

Deny Jesus or die; accept the religion of the culture or lose your job; stay away from those other Christians or get out of this house.

My first inclination was to say that American Christians don’t suffer persecution; that Peter’s words don’t apply to us.

Then I realized that for most of history, persecution has been subtler, or more subtle, than crucifixions, burnings at the stake or firing squads.

In fact Peter said they suffer grief in “**all kinds** of trials.”

The words, “all kinds” are used just as we use them – “In school today, I got in all kinds of trouble” - meaning not every kind but various kinds.

What do these trials look like in our culture?

A young man becomes a Christian and can no longer engage in the same lifestyle as before.

His friends in those past activities find his change offensive and maybe indicting and they become hostile toward him.

He feels the alienation, the loneliness; he feels misunderstood.

He feels the sting of their criticism and the gossip about his motives when they say, “He thinks he’s too good for us.”

Later in this letter, Peter would describe that situation this way: 1 Peter 4:4 “They think it strange that you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation, and they heap abuse on you.”

Or another example, a believer won’t participate in a boss’s unethical behavior.

He curses at her and threatens her.

She is ostracized in the office.

She is passed over for promotion, given the least desirable tasks and marked down in her performance reviews until she is finally “legally” fired.

Or it is the believer whose non-Christian family now ridicules him or even disowns him.

A friend of mine clearly recalls the hostility of her family toward her and her husband when they became Christians and began teaching their son Christianity.

Or consider the secular university. The Christian’s conflict with the prevailing culture is very evident.

It seems that every serious Christian who dares to speak has faced the ridicule and discrimination of not only fellow students but especially professors.

Or try to carry a pro-life or pro-marriage agenda to a political caucus of either party and you can feel the reaction and maybe become a pariah in your own neighborhood.

It is also true that the persecution, the pressure, may not come from a person but simply from the culture as a whole.

For example, a believer learns that she is unexpectedly pregnant and the financial hardship on the existing family by the birth of another child is obvious and severe.

Or she learns the child is not forming correctly either physically or mentally.

In a culture that sees children as a burden and affluence as a necessity, not getting an abortion may well bring discrimination.

In a culture that places emphasis on physical prowess, mental acumen and Ken and Barbie appearance, some think it is cruel to allow a handicapped child to be born.

And to oppose those cultural values will bring down disapproval if not scorn even by ones own family.

I have another illustration that is so minor that I'm almost embarrassed to mention it.

But it illustrates another aspect of conflict with the culture in living Christianly in a non-Christian world.

My son is part of a soccer team.

Next Sunday **morning** there is a tournament.

I'm certain that the league and the coaches meant no malice in scheduling the tournament on a Sunday morning.

In fact it is worse than malice, they didn't even think of the conflict it would be with Sunday worship

They are simply operating out of the values of the prevailing culture.

But what do I teach my son about the importance of being with God's people in the public worship of God if I allow him to play?

The pressure is to simply let him play; after all it's only one Sunday.

Then feeling like Tevya in "Fiddler on the Roof," I ask, "Where will that lead?"

The hardship is in denying my son the joy of playing, but believing there are greater values to be upheld.

Of course my son had a solution: Just go to Sunday school and then leave, (After all, he doesn't like my long sermons anyway.)

But if I do so, do I succumb to the attitude that church is an obligation to be gotten out of the way so we can get on to more important things?

I know that in this culture the pressure to play Sunday morning games will grow more intense if he progresses in soccer.

And the conflict will grow - will he even be allowed to play on a team if he won't play on Sunday mornings?

Will he suffer the disappointment and disapproval of his teammates?

Since we don't believe it is necessarily wrong to play games on Sunday, we have decided that he will play only after we have participated in a greater privilege.

Now what this minor personal crisis illustrates is the issue of self-denial.

Some suffering is not brought on by direct attack.

Instead the suffering results from denying ourselves some of what the prevailing culture says is right and good.

As I said earlier, the culture places such high value on affluence - the right clothes, the right car, the right house, the right vacations, the right education, and the right toys, that to deny ourselves those things becomes painful.

It hurts to deny ourselves for the sake of higher goals.

Karen Jobes gets at this issue when she writes, "Sin is often thought of as being motivated by the temptation for pleasure. But perhaps the real power of sin lies in the avoidance of pain and suffering. Is that

not what self-denial means? ...Isn't the temptation to lie often an attempt to save face rather than face the consequences of the truth? Isn't the temptation to cheat on an exam an unwillingness to suffer the loss of reputation or other consequences that failure might bring? Isn't sexual sin often the alternative to suffering by living with deep emotional or physical needs unmet?" (Jobes, 5)

God knows how deeply entrenched is our love of self and pleasure and our avoidance of self-denial and pain.

It is no easy thing to drive a love for the world out of us.

But even though self-denial brings suffering it is better than yielding to sin.

Jesus said in Matthew 16:24-26 "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?

Living Christianly in a non-Christian world will bring conflict and that conflict is painful but the Bible says it is worth it. How so?

Peter says, let me tell you the results of that suffering, of that obedience to Jesus even when it is costly.

1 Peter 1:7 "These (trials) have come so that your faith--of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire--may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed."

God is continually using the pain of persecution and self-denial to prove to us the genuineness of our faith AND to increase our faith.

Our faith is the issue here.

And by definition, faith entails trial.

It wouldn't be faith if it were never tested.

Spurgeon wrote, "The trial of your faith is sent to prove its (genuineness). If it will not stand trial, what is the good of it?"

You can't be sure that your faith is true faith till it is tried faith. You can't be certain that it is worth having till it has been fitly tested, and brought to the touchstone of trial. (Charles Spurgeon, Sermon #2055)

As long as we have family, friends, enough money, government programs, and self-confidence we have sufficient visible support to maintain an optimistic outlook on life even through tough times.

But when all of that is removed and we are left with nothing but God, then we find out if our faith is real.

And God says that he allows us to go through those experiences so that we can see that the faith he gave us is truly genuine.

The beauty here is that God isn't trying to make us fail; his goal is the very opposite, he is proving that our faith is real.

God says not only is he proving the genuineness of our faith but he is also refining it.

Peter uses the analogy of smelting gold to remove the impurities.

Likewise, God allows the heat to be turned up in our lives to remove the impurities – to purge the other idols that we trust more than him.

It is what I call “raw faith” – faith resting only in God and his promises.

One man wrote, “Christian discipline means...a progressive weakening of man's instinctive self-confidence, and of the self-despair to which this leads, and the growth of radical confidence in God.” (C.K. Barrett in David Prior, *The Suffering and the Glory*, 31)

In 2 Chronicles 34 is the account of King Abijah of Judah with a force of 400,000 soldiers being attacked by King Jereboam of Israel with 800,000 soldiers.

Abijah turned to the Lord and with faith in the Lord went into battle.

He won a great victory that day.

Can you imagine how his faith increased that day?

God knows that as he walks with us through those hard times, our faith in him will grow.

I'm often surprised when I hear the testimonies of older Christians. Their lives seem so peaceful and their faith so strong and I wonder how they got there.

Then I hear of a family that forsook them when they became Christians, a child that died, a neighbor that hated them for their Christianity, a spouse that betrayed them, and financial hardships because of their ethical stand.

Then I realize that all those experiences strengthened their faith.

Before he was king, young David, of the Old Testament, saw the faithfulness of God in defeating a bear and another time a lion, before David was ready for a Goliath.

Will God allow the heat to get so high that your faith fails?

According to Peter's analogy it is possible to turn the heat up so high on gold that you destroy it.

Not so with faith, the heat won't destroy it but only prove it and improve it.

Isn't that the promise of 1 Corinthians 10:13 "And God is faithful; he will not let you be (tested) beyond what you can bear. But when you are (tested), he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it."

Robert Leighton wrote, Faith, 'even in the heart of weak and sinful man, is an invincible thing. Drown it in the waters of adversity, it rises more beautiful, as not being drowned indeed, but only washed; throw it into the furnace of fiery trials, it comes out purer, and loses nothing but the dross which our corrupt nature mixes with it.' (Leighton, 47)

Earlier I said there are three questions the text answers:

We've looked at the first two: "What are these "trials" that we suffer and what do they result in.

We look finally at the third: How are we to respond to the persecution we face?

1 Peter 1:6 “In this you greatly rejoice...”

But be careful that you don't misunderstand.

Peter doesn't say to rejoice about the suffering –
Christians don't take pleasure in the suffering.

Not only that, but Peter Davids wrote, “The ‘rejoicing’ is not a continual feeling of hilarity nor a denial of the reality of pain and suffering, but an anticipatory joy experienced even now, despite the outward circumstances, **because** the believers know that their sufferings are only “for a little while” and their inheritance is sure and eternal.” (Peter Davids, 55)

Peter really says that we rejoice in what the suffering **reveals**.

It reveals that we truly belong to Christ and that everything
verses 3-5 say about our future is true.

1 Peter 1:3-5 God “has given **us** new birth into **a living hope** through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, **and into an inheritance** that can never perish, spoil or fade--kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.”

Our hope is stronger than the distress.

The reward is more enduring than the pain.

The future is more certain than even the present.

The conflict and the suffering also reveal something else.

Peter writes of it in verses 8-9: “Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

Notice that just as in the preceding verses, so here Peter points us not just to the future but also to a person – the person of Jesus.

We don't have faith in faith; we have faith in Jesus.

And the suffering reveals that we do in fact belong to Christ and our future with him is secure.

So certain is the promise and so great is our God that we are able to rejoice in the midst of suffering.

Sri Lanka is the island country off the south coast of India.

It has been in the news for decades because of a civil war in which Christians are caught in the crossfire.

In 1986 Lionel and Lalani Jayasinghe began a small house church after Lionel, a Buddhist monk had converted to Christianity. Immediately the opposition came.

Local Buddhist monks went from house warning against the Christians.

Death threats came in the mail ordering Lionel to leave.

On Friday night, March 25, 1988, after putting her 11-month-old son to bed, Lalani heard a gunshot.

Lionel came lurching into the bedroom with a man stabbing him.

Seeing the intruder, Lalani moved to protect her son while another shot finally killed her husband.

The intruders disappeared.

Though her husband was dead, Lalani determined to stay and help the new Christians.

Her landlord demanded that she move.

But rocks were thrown at their next home as well; along with threatening letters demanding that she leave.

Protests against the church were organized and the roof was burned.

Lalani said, "God became very close to me during that time. I would tell him everything.

I said, 'If you want me to die, I'm ready, but I'd prefer not, because I have work to do here.

But if I die, I want to write on the wall with my blood, 'Jesus is alive.'"

In April of 1999 two bombs exploded on the property of the church doing extensive damage.

Tim Stafford who tells the story spoke of being in one of the worship services just a couple of years ago:

“It is a large, simple building with benches for several hundred. Lalani had put on a white sari, and she led worship with an effortless enthusiasm.

I thought she seemed not only strong but also happy—deeply, unconditionally happy.”

Later over lunch, Lanlai was asked how things were with the church, she replied, "Wonderful! Praise the Lord!"

Later she gave a more detailed report, telling how the local opposition had that week organized a protest march against her church, and then burned the thatch roof.

Some asked why she said that everything was wonderful.

"Obviously," she answered enthusiastically, "since the thatch is gone, God must intend to give us a metal roof!" <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2003/010/5.54.html>

As Paul Sailhamer wrote, "Joy is that deep settled confidence that God is in control of every area of my life." Paul Sailhamer.

<http://www.suffering.net/suffjoy.htm>

1 Peter 1:6-7 “In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith--of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire--may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.”

Other notes:

“trials” maybe translated “temptation”

The same circumstance can be a temptation and a trial at the same time.

The Enemy’s purpose and God’s purpose are diametrically opposite.

A temptation is designed to cause us to fail. God doesn’t tempt according to the Bible (James 1:13)

A trial is a way of testing the strength of something – not for the purpose of proving it weak or faulty but for the purpose of proving it strong and genuine.

How could we ever know the strength of our faith if it were never tested?

“He who framed the heart, knows it to be but deceitful, and he who gives grace, knows the weakness and strength of it exactly; yet he is pleased to speak thus, that by affliction and hard tasks he tries what is in the hearts of his children.” (Robert Leighton, 43)

“Only as faith is contested will faith be confirmed. I do not know whether my experience is that of all God’s people; but I am afraid that all the grace that I have got out of my comfortable and easy times and happy hours, might almost lie on a penny. But the good that I have received from my sorrows, and pains, and griefs, is altogether incalculable. What do I not owe to the hammer and the anvil, the fire and the file? What do I not owe to the crucible and the furnace, the bellows that have blown up the coals, and the hand, which has thrust me into the heat? Affliction is the best bit of furniture in my house. It is the best book in a minister’s library. We may wisely rejoice in tribulation, because it worketh patience, and patience experience, and experience hope; and by that way we are exceedingly enriched, and our faith grows strong. Spurgeon, Sermon # 2055

“for a little while” - trials are temporary in spite of what they may seem in the moment. They are temporary in relationship to eternity and they are usually temporary in relationship to life here and now – not all of life is painful.

A man is not only unknown by others but even by himself. We can say that we would do such and such under adverse circumstances, but we don't know until it happens.

I remember coming on a serious automobile accident on the main highway from the north into Mexico City.

There were two bodies on the roadway and no other vehicles or people in sight.

I remember saying to the others in the van with me, as I got out, "I don't know if I can do this or not."

"The Christian life is one of hope despite the fact that our future salvation is not yet revealed, and that it is also a life of rejoicing despite present testing of faith. He says finally, that it is a life of believing despite not yet seeing the Savior." (I. Howard Marshall, *1 Peter*, 42)

The following quotes are noted at <http://www.suffering.net/suffjoy.htm>
 "I walked a mile with pleasure, she chatted all the way. It left me none the wiser, for all she had to say. I walked a mile with sorrow and ne're a word said she, but oh the things I learned from her, when sorrow walked with me." Unknown

Walter Wangerin wrote, "The difference between shallow happiness and a deep sustaining joy is sorrow. Happiness lives where sorrow is not. When sorrow arrives, happiness dies. It can't stand pain. Joy, on the other hand, rises from sorrow and therefore can withstand all grief. Joy, by the grace of God, is the transfiguration of suffering into endurance, and of endurance into character, and of character into hope--and the hope that has become our joy does not (as happiness must for those who depend upon it) disappoint us." *Walter Wangerin, Reliving the Passion*

"Never fear shadows. They simply mean there's a light shining somewhere nearby." Ruth E. Renkel

"Christianity is not a religion of comfort - - - at least not at first." CS Lewis, Mere Christianity

The following article appeared in Albert Mohler's blog for Sept 2006 at <http://www.albertmohler.com/blog.php>

The cover photograph for this week's issue of *TIME* magazine just about says it all -- a picture of a Rolls Royce grille with a chrome cross as hood ornament. In the event anyone missed the point, the cover asks: "[Does God Want You to Be Rich?](#)"

Theological confusion takes many forms, but with this cover story, *TIME* directs us to one of the most pervasive perversions of the Christian Gospel in our times -- prosperity theology. The article, written by David Van Biema and Jeff Chu, is fair, balanced, and devastating.

As they explain:

For several decades, a philosophy has been percolating in the 10 million--strong Pentecostal wing of Christianity that seems to turn the Gospels' passage on its head: certainly, it allows, Christians should keep one eye on heaven. But the new good news is that God doesn't want us to wait. Known (or vilified) under a variety of names--Word of Faith, Health and Wealth, Name It and Claim It, Prosperity Theology--its emphasis is on God's promised generosity in this life and the ability of believers to claim it for themselves. In a nutshell, it suggests that a God who loves you does not want you to be broke. Its signature verse could be John 10:10: "I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly." In a TIME poll, 17% of Christians surveyed said they considered themselves part of such a movement, while a full 61% believed that God wants people to be prosperous. And 31%--a far higher percentage than there are Pentecostals in America--agreed that if you give your money to God, God will bless you with more money.

Then:

*"Prosperity" first blazed to public attention as the driveshaft in the moneymaking machine that was 1980s televangelism and faded from mainstream view with the Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart scandals. But now, after some key modifications (which have inspired some to redub it Prosperity Lite), it has not only recovered but is booming. Of the four biggest megachurches in the country, three--Osteen's Lakewood in Houston; T.D. Jakes' Potter's House in south Dallas; and Creflo Dollar's World Changers near Atlanta--are Prosperity or Prosperity Lite pulpits (although Jakes' ministry has many more facets). While they don't exclusively teach that God's riches want to be in believers' wallets, it is a key part of their doctrine. And propelled by Osteen's 4 million--selling book, *Your Best Life Now*, the belief has swept beyond its Pentecostal base into more*

buttoned-down evangelical churches, and even into congregations in the more liberal Mainline. It is taught in hundreds of non-Pentecostal Bible studies. One Pennsylvania Lutheran pastor even made it the basis for a sermon series for Lent, when Christians usually meditate on why Jesus was having His Worst Life Then. Says the Rev. Chappell Temple, a Methodist minister with the dubious distinction of pastoring Houston's other Lakewood Church (Lakewood United Methodist), an hour north of Osteen's: "Prosperity Lite is everywhere in Christian culture. Go into any Christian bookstore, and see what they're offering."

Yes, go into those bookstores if you dare. The consistent message you will find is that God wants you to be wealthy. Interestingly, health seems to have taken a back seat to wealth. Those described by Van Biema and Chu as "Prosperity Lite" preachers are unlikely to offer old-style healing services like those of Oral Roberts. It is material prosperity that takes center stage in their message.

The reporters lay out the basic theological and biblical issues, pointing to the anomaly of Christ's Gospel repackaged as material prosperity. They also try to place the prosperity preachers in a cultural and historical context:

If the rest of Protestantism ignored finances, Prosperity placed them center stage, marrying Pentecostalism's ebullient notion of God's gifts with an older tradition that stressed the power of positive thinking. Practically, it emphasized hard work and good home economics. But the real heat was in its spiritual premise: that if a believer could establish, through word and deed (usually donation), that he or she was "in Jesus Christ," then Jesus' father would respond with paternal gifts of health and wealth in this life.

The prosperity preachers find their roots in the Pentecostal tradition. The most famous among them -- like Joel Osteen and Creflo Dollar -- spread their messages through television and publishing. Osteen now dominates the field like no other, and he is front and center in the *TIME* article.

Prosperity theology is fueled by the combination of Pentecostal teaching and American consumerism. Our culture of material abundance (and consumerist appetites) is fertile ground for the emergence of this distorted and corrupted teaching. Jesus never promised His disciples material security, much less material prosperity. The benefits of the Gospel of Christ are redefined in terms of material and financial blessings.

The reporters quote one man who acknowledged the influence of Joel Osteen and his teaching:

"I'm dreaming big--because all of heaven is dreaming big," [George] Adams continues. "Jesus died for our sins. That was the best gift God could give us," he says. "But we have something else. Because I want to follow Jesus and do what he ordained, God wants to support us. It's Joel Osteen's ministry that told me. Why would an awesome and mighty God want anything less for his children?"

Well . . . why *would* an awesome and mighty God want anything less for his children? The saddest aspect of that question is its focus on material prosperity at the expense of the limitless spiritual riches we are given in Christ. The problem with prosperity theology is not that it promises too much, but that it promises so little -- and promises that so falsely.

Of even greater significance is the eclipse of the authentic Gospel of Christ. The justification of sinners is ignored as material prosperity and wealth dominate the message.