

## **+ 2 Timothy 1:8-14 + How Do You Bear a Cross? + 6th Sunday After Pentecost + 12 July 2009 +**

Paul was born into a small-town Lutheran family—a big one with lots of brothers and sisters. His mother, a pastor's daughter, had the difficult task of caring for all of them after their father died when Paul was very young. Like countless others who have gone on to the public ministry, he spent his early years at home before going off to study to be a Lutheran pastor.

Though Paul grew up in the shelter of a small town, he did not go unaffected by events in the world around him. For thirty years, war raged across central Europe. Armies ravaged the land, destroyed cities and wiped out towns. Countless lives were lost and countries were set back decades. Paul was not immune to the horrors of war. At the age of thirty, he watched an army burn down his home, his hometown, and his church. All that even though the people had raised the large sum the enemy had demanded. Later that same summer, plague killed three hundred of the townspeople.

After the war and eighteen years of waiting, at the age of 45, Paul received his first assignment into the pastoral ministry. Then at the age of 48, the Lord blessed him with a wife and five children. He later served another congregation and the Lord blessed his ministry there, but Paul was later removed from office because he refused to compromise the pure teaching of God's Word. So he suffered. While in constant conflict with the authorities over the teaching of God's Word, Paul was without steady employment, became very poor, and lived on the charity of Lutheran laypeople. Illness claimed the lives of four kids and then his wife, leaving a 6-year-old son. At age 62, Paul was called to serve another congregation, where he served until his death at the age of 69. For good reason, Paul Gerhardt has been described as "a theologian strained in the sieve of Satan".

You look at his life and questions come to mind. How did he endure it all? Why endure so much suffering especially when he could've made life easier for himself? He suffered poverty and woe for standing up for the truth of God's Word. He endured the horrors of war and lost most of his family to illness. It doesn't seem fair. How could he not throw his hands up in despair at the injustice of the destruction of his home? How could he not shake his fist in rage at the almighty God when he lost his wife and children? How could he not toss the cross aside in resignation when he was deposed for the truth after all those years of waiting to serve? How did he bear the cross? Let's let him explain.

***"Why should cross and trial grieve me? Christ is near with his cheer; never will he leave me. Who can rob me of the heaven that God's Son for me won when his life was given? When life's troubles rise to meet me, though their weight may be great, they will not defeat me. God, my loving Savior, sees them; He who knows all my woes knows how best to end them. God gives me my days of gladness, and I will trust him still when he sends me sadness. God is good; his love attends me day by day, come what may, guides me and defends me."*** How could Paul bear the cross? It wasn't because he was so tough under pressure. No, he knew Christ bore the cross for him. How could Paul endure all that suffering, all that sorrow, all that loss, all that woe with such confidence and hope? It wasn't because he was such an extraordinary person or so heroic. No, he knew Christ had endured suffering and sorrow and loss and woe for him. He understood God's good and gracious purpose even with suffering. Above all, he understood the joy of God's grace in Christ Jesus. He knew Jesus would never leave him, even in the face of death and suffering. Basically he had the same attitude of his namesake, St. Paul.

In the lesson before us we find St. Paul near the end of his life locked up in chains in a cold Roman dungeon deserted by many who had supported him and betrayed by some who called themselves Christians. When he stood on trial before the Roman Emperor Nero, the verdict was not a pleasant one. Paul was to be executed by beheading. It was time to bid farewell to those who knew and loved him. So he wrote this final letter to his dear friend, Pastor Timothy. It's a brief book—only four chapters, but you don't find Paul complaining. You don't find him disappointed or grieving or wondering if Christ has abandoned him. Instead Paul confidently rejoices in the face of death with his focus even sharper on the beauty of the Gospel.

***"So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God, who has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus ..."*** For St. Paul, it was all about the good news of God's grace in Christ Jesus even in the face of suffering and death. The truth is he didn't have to suffer. He didn't have to sit in chains in a dark dungeon awaiting the executioner's sword. He could've denied it. He could've at least set it aside until the time was more convenient, but the Gospel of Jesus Christ was more important to him than even death. Paul had earlier written to the Romans, ***"I am not ashamed of the Gospel because it is the power of God for the***

**salvation of everyone who believes...**” At the end of his life his confession is the same, **“And of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher. That is why I am suffering as I am. Yet I am not ashamed because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day.”**

How could St. Paul bear the cross? How could he not sit in those heavy chains in that dark cell and not allow despair to eat away at him as death crept closer? How could he not sit there and rage against Christ who seemed to have abandoned him in his hour of need like the others? How could Paul not sit there and be filled with disappointment because God had dealt him a bad hand and death was on the way or resign himself to hopelessness because so many had deserted him or betrayed him?

It certainly wasn't because Paul was so tough under pressure or could handle stress and suffering in a heroic way. It certainly wasn't because he was such an extraordinary person or even a good person. Paul was a damned sinner like every one of us sitting right here. Don't forget he had once rabidly persecuted Christians, even approving their death so he could do God a favor. Like every one of us, Paul didn't deserve God's grace, but God still showed it, still demonstrated it, still revealed it **“through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.”** How could Paul bear the cross? He could because Christ had appeared to live for sinners like him and you and me, because we were all condemned to death and in desperate need of his grace. Paul could bear the cross of suffering and death because Christ Jesus, for whom Paul suffered, had appeared in order to suffer and bear the cross of Calvary for him, to carry the load of his guilt and sin and your guilt and your sins and remove all that guilt and sin forever.

How could Paul suffer? How could he face death? How could he be so confident that he could even face the Last Day, when Christ would come again to judge the living and the dead? **“I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day.”** By faith, Paul entrusted everything to Jesus—his life, his all. For Paul, death was the ultimate triumph in the One who had conquered death.

So how do you bear a cross? How do you face rejection for your Christian faith from those you know and love? How do you face the reality of that loved one young or old lying in a hospital bed or in that casket being lowered into the ground? How do you face the reality of suffering and loss for Christ that just grates on the reason and expectations of your sinful self? How do you face the troubles in your life that don't go away just because you're a Christian? How do you face the reality of your own death?

On your own, you're left with the vain hope that death will end it all, but in reality, all such crosses will crush you no matter how tough or how good you try to be. On your own, no matter how much you try to cover it up with pleasant memories and pretty flowers, death is still a terrifying reality that leaves you empty with hopelessness and despair, but you don't have to endure all that on your own. You don't because Christ bore his cross first for you. He did it because of his amazing grace. **“This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.”**

How do you bear a cross? By knowing whom you believe—Christ Jesus your only Lord and Savior, who gave his life on the cross and took it back up again for you. By being convinced that you can entrust your everything to him who lived and died and rose again for you. By guarding the **“good deposit...entrusted to you”**—the good deposit of the Gospel guarded with your life and with the Spirit's help. The truth is, by God's grace, a time will come when you will lay aside those heavy crosses of this life and share in the eternal victory won by Christ and given in the Gospel.

So **“why should cross and trial grieve me?”** Why should foes and suffering frighten me? Why should death alarm me? As you and I bear crosses as followers of Christ, as we one day face death, we face them with confident faith in the Savior, who bore the cross and death for us first. A verse added to Gerhardt's hymn expresses our confidence well as Christ's holy people. **“Since I know God never fails me, in his voice I'll rejoice when grim death assails me. Trusting in my Savior's merit, safe at last, troubles past, I shall heav'n inherit.”** Amen.