

A DESTRUCTIVE GOSPEL

[2 Corinthians 12:7-10](#)



I've got some great news for you today. This is going to be the best news you have ever heard. Are you ready for it? Here it is, God wants you, all of you, to be healthy, wealthy, pain free and to prosper in whatever you do. Is that good news or what? That is great news, I like hearing that, don't you? Do you like that message? Why not? What could possibly be wrong with the message that God wants you, all of you, to be healthy, wealthy, pain free and to prosper in whatever you do?



The only problem with this message is, it isn't true. So does truth matter? Yes, it does and especially when we are talking about God and the Bible.

Let me ask you this morning, ***“How do you feel about the health wealth gospel?”*** Are you indifferent to it, are you tolerant of it? If you don't hate it, if it doesn't make you crazy with anger then one of two things is true, 1. Either you don't understand what the prosperity gospel is teaching or 2. You don't understand the Gospel. Because if you understand the Gospel and you know what the teachers of the health, wealth gospel are preaching it should make you livid! And if it doesn't, you need to wake up because a false gospel is sweeping our nation while we sit quietly by.



I think that Paul's words to the Philippian church are pertinent to us today:

Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ; so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel; (Philippians 1:27 NASB)

Paul tells these believers to “stand firm” — this is from the Greek word [steko](#) [sth/kw]. This is a military term that means: ***“to be at point in a war, to stand fast, to be stabilized.”*** It is used of a soldier who will not budge from his post no matter how bad it gets.

Paul is telling them to remain at their post and not move— no compromise with error or sin, in doctrine or conduct. When Paul says “stand firm,” he has in mind resisting temptation to doctrinal and moral compromise. This military metaphor has to do with holding a position while under tremendous attack.

Paul tells them that they are to be, ***“Striving together for the faith of the gospel.”*** The words “striving together” are from the Greek word [sunathleo](#) [sunaql eflw], which comes from *sun* which means “together with” and [athleo](#) [aθl eflw] which means ***“to engage in competition or conflict.”***

It carries the association of contest in war and in the arena where the gladiatorial struggle was one of life and death. This is a call for team effort— struggling together. Believers we are to be ***“standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel.”*** The gospel message is so unclear today it's a wonder that anybody has a clue as to what it is.

The Gospel is the good news that God has provided redemption for sinful man through the death of His Son. This redemption is available to all who believe. Faith in Christ can take a sinner who is depraved in mind, body, and spirit and cleanse him from all sin, make him righteous in the sight of God, and give him eternal life. Now that's good news!

The Gospel is not I trust Christ to pay my sin debt and then life is perfect. It just doesn't work that way. I'll still have flat tires, broken bones, arguments with my wife, and financial struggles. That's reality. That life! But the proponents of the health/wealth gospel teach that God rewards increasing levels of faith with greater amounts of health and wealth. They teach that God not only gives you eternal life but He also wants you to be rich, healthy, pain free and problem free.

How did something so far from the truth of the Bible ever come to be taught? Good question. Let me give you a little history on the prosperity gospel.

The earliest proponents of positive thinking were spiritual innovators like [Phineas P. Quimby](#) and [Mary Baker Eddy](#), founders of the New Thought movement and Christian Science, respectively. By the turn of the 20th century, [Essek William Kenyon](#), a pastor and founder of Bethel Bible Institute, had incorporated similar ideas into his preaching on the finished work of Christ. Kenyon wrote that Christians could make a "*positive confession*" to bring emotional and physical desires into being. "*What I confess,*" he is purported to have said, "*I possess.*"

In the 1930s, [Kenneth Hagin](#) added Kenyon's teachings to his Pentecostal beliefs to create what would become the Word-Faith movement. An Assemblies of God pastor, Hagin taught Christians that they could get rich by mustering enough faith. "*Say it, do it, receive it, tell it,*" he said. He touted a "*Rhema doctrine,*" which held that words spoken in faith must be fulfilled, spawning slogans like "*name it and claim it.*" In the 1960s, a young associate of [Oral Roberts](#), [Kenneth Copeland](#), began teaching that faith is a "force" which, when confessed out loud, brings material results. Within a couple decades, Word-Faith had grown into a sizable offshoot of charismatic faith.

The teachings of these men may be summarized as follows: God created man in "God's class" (or, as "little gods"), with the potential to exercise the "*God kind of faith*" in calling things into existence and living in prosperity and success as sovereign beings. We forfeited this opportunity, however, by rebelling against God in the Garden and taking upon ourselves Satan's nature. To correct this situation, Jesus Christ became a man, died spiritually (thus taking upon Himself Satan's nature), went to Hell, was "*born again,*" rose from the dead with God's nature again, and then sent the Holy Spirit so that the Incarnation could be duplicated in believers, thus fulfilling their calling to be little gods. Since we are called to experience this kind of life now, we should be successful in every area of our lives. To be in debt, then, or be sick, or (as is often taught) be left by one's spouse, and not to have these problems solved by "*claiming*" God's promises, shows a lack of faith. While certain aspects of the above doctrine may vary from teacher to teacher, the general outline remains the same in each case.

The tentacles of this kind of theology has reached out far and wide. And of course it appeals to people because it demands nothing but faith and it promises that if you have enough you'll get rich and healthy—that's a popular message.

Listen to what some of its teachers say:

- ❖ *I am fully convinced - I would die saying it is so - that it is the plan of Our Father God, in His great love and in His great mercy, that no believer should ever be sick; that every believer should live his full life span down here on this earth; and that every believer should finally just fall asleep in Jesus" (Kenneth E. Hagin, Seven Things You Should Know about Divine Healing, p. 21).*

Kenneth Copeland on page 51 of his book, [The Laws of Prosperity](#), says, "*You must realize that it is God's will for you to prosper. This is available to you, and frankly, it would be stupid of you not to partake of it.*"

The cardinal fault with the prosperity gospel is one central tenet: God wills the financial prosperity of every Christian, therefore, for a believer to live in poverty is living outside God's intended will. Normally tucked away somewhere is another affirmation: Since we are God's children, we should always go first class; we should have the biggest and the best. Only this brings glory to God!

Now though these false gospel teachers ignore the majority of God's word they do attempt to back up their teaching

with Scripture. Rarely does a faith-message publication or teacher fail to quote from 3 John 2 which says:

Beloved, I pray that in all respects you may prosper and be in good health, just as your soul prospers.
(3 John 1:2 NASB)

The prosperity teachers claim this verse proves conclusively that Christians will always prosper in direct proportion to the condition of their soul. In other words if you are walking close to God you'll be rich. If you are in poverty you must be in sin.

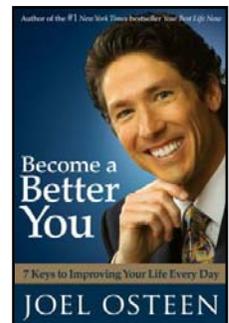
This verse is not a declaration from God for the whole body of Christ, nor should it be viewed as a promise, it merely records the prayer of John for his friend Gaius.

This epistle is modeled after the typical letter format of the first century. William Barclay points out this fact by quoting from a pagan ship's captain which uses almost identical phraseology as that found in 3 John 2.

Howard Marshall, in the New International Commentary confirms Barclay's views in stating that the Elder (John) follows the traditional custom of his time by expressing good wishes to his friend, Gaius.

It is not a universal declaration from God with regard to His will for all believers. To construe it that way is to remove it from its literary and historical context. ***The Bible is written for us, but it is not written to us.*** Paul's commands to Timothy to watch out for Alexander, and to bring his cloak before winter, and his instructions to Titus to remain in Crete are all a part of the Word of God, but they are not written to us. But many people fail to make this distinction. In the case of the prosperity teachers, they have confused the difference between an individual address and a universal promise.

Now you might ask, Why should this matter to us? Certainly none of us believe in this false gospel. I realize that but what you need to realize is that this false teaching is taking over churchanity. In a Time poll, a full 61% believed that God wants people to be prosperous. Thanks to [Joel Osteen's](#) book, [Your Best Life Now](#), which has sold over 4 million copies, this belief has swept beyond its Pentecostal base into all of churchanity.



It may seem foolish to disagree theologically with the man who pastors the largest congregation in America. Thirty-thousand adults attend Joel Osteen's church every Sunday. Millions more tune in to his national and international television broadcasts. Certainly (one might assume) a man with this incredible following must be on the right track. Well he's not! He is a false teacher, preaching a false gospel.

Joel Osteen's wild popularity is truly a testament to the condition of churchanity in America. His motivational speaking tickles the ears of the not-really-convicted-of-sin. He purposefully avoids entire areas of God's truth, resulting in a lopsided, sugary-sweet "gospel" that has next to nothing to do with God's glory or Christ's atonement, and everything to do with self-improvement. It is not even half a gospel—it is no gospel at all, and that is the reason why thousands flock to feed upon it and millions of others watch it on TV. It has no holy God, no divine wrath, no need for atonement, no repentance, no death to self—it is the polar opposite, as it is all about me, me, and me.

Human religion invariably invents gods for utilitarian reasons. They invent gods that give them what they want. They invent deities to serve them rather than the other way around. The health/wealth theology has turned Christianity into a system that is no different from the lowest human religions. It is a form of voodoo where God can be coerced, cajoled, manipulated, controlled, and exploited for the Christian's own ends.

Let's look at an excerpt for one of Joel's messages to his 30,000 member church so we can understand just what he is teaching:

Because of the price He paid we have a right to live in total victory. Not partial victory to where we have

a good family we have good health but we constantly struggle in our finances. That's not total victory. If God did it for you in one area He can do it in another area. Get a vision for it. I know people who have plenty of money and they have good health but they can't get along in relationships. There is always strife in their home, that is not total victory. Maybe God's blessed you and you have a good family and a good job but you've had pain in your body for years and years, you used to stand against it, you used to believe you could be free. But now it's been so long you've just decided, this is my lot in life... But Jesus has paid the price that we may be totally free. That means free from bad habits and addictions, free from discouragement and depression, free from poverty and lack, free from low self-esteem. God wants us to be totally free. The Scripture tells us to take hold of all that Christ died and rose again for. God made you healthy and whole, our original state is total freedom...Let me assure you He didn't create you to be average. He didn't create you to barely get by and have all kinds of things holding you back. You've got to get the right vision God created you to be totally free, to have peace in your mind, to walk in divine health, to have good relationships, to have plenty to pay your bills...You have rights and privileges. One of those privileges is total victory. We're supposed to be unquestionably free, that means free in our mind free from worry. Free from poverty and lack, no matter what the bank account looks like our attitude is I know I am blessed and I cannot be cursed. Whatever I touch is going to prosper and succeed.

By Joel's definition walking with God in spiritual maturity means that you are wealthy, healthy, with good relationships, living in victory without pain or anxiety. The problem with this view is that it excludes Jesus and the New Testament church.

How does Jesus fit this description? Was He rich? Not hardly! Throughout His three and one half year ministry, walked throughout the land without even possessing a home to which He might return (Luke 9:58)—He was homeless, and was supported by others at a very basic level at all times. We would be tempted to call this "poverty".

Did Jesus have problems with relationships? All the religious leaders hated Him, His family rejected Him, Peter denied Him, Judas betrayed Him and the people shouted, "Crucify Him." I guess Jesus wasn't living in total victory in His relationships. How about the area of pain. Did Jesus suffer pain? He was scourged, beaten, spit upon and crucified—that is pain. So this life of victory that Joel talks about was not lived by Jesus and the Bible says that we are to imitate Him and live as He lived:

the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked. (1 John 2:6 NASB)

If we do this, if we live like Jesus we are going to have the same problems that Jesus had. If we live like Christ we are going to miss out on the victorious life that Joel offers.

How about the disciples of our Lord? Did they live in total victory—were they healthy, wealthy, pain free? No! None of the apostles were rich. All underwent incredible testing, suffering, and, in at least Paul's case, dire health problems and extreme testing in the area of material privation.

Let's look at the Apostle Paul, was he a godly man who walked in fellowship with God? Yes he was, God used Paul to write most of the New Testament. Did Paul ever have problems with relationships? Paul spent a lot of time in prison:

At my first defense no one supported me, but all deserted me; may it not be counted against them. (2 Timothy 4:16 NASB)

How about in the area of physical pain, did Paul have physical problems?

And because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me-- to keep me from

exalting myself! (2 Corinthians 12:7 NASB)

Here we see that Paul had a physical problem. The Word of God tells us why he had this problem. It wasn't because he wasn't walking in total victory; it was to keep him humble. That is a good thing because God gives grace to the humble.

Concerning this I entreated the Lord three times that it might depart from me. (2 Corinthians 12:8 NASB)

Paul prayed and asked God to take it away. Notice God's answer:

And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me. (2 Corinthians 12:9 NASB)

Does Paul boast about his total victor over poverty and pain? No! He boasts in his weaknesses. Notice why:

Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Corinthians 12:10 NASB)

Please grasp this: the health/wealth gospel totally misses this. Paul says, "***When I am weak***"—this would be physical sickness, poverty, bad relationships—"***then I am strong.***" You see it is when we have problems in life that we turn to Christ and trust His strength.

Look at Paul's personal testimony and see if it fits Joel's idea of total victory:

Are they servants of Christ? (I speak as if insane) I more so; in far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death. ²⁴ Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. ²⁶ I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; ²⁷ I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. (2 Corinthians 11:27 NASB)

Has Joel never read this? This is what living for Christ and walking in obedience to God looked like for Paul. How many of you want to sign up for this kind of a life? If Joel were to preach this as God's will for believers he wouldn't need such a large building.

When the church proclaims that God desires to provide wealth to you and that you lack it because of 'faith', what does that say to the millions of godly people living in poverty?

Every Sunday, 30 Kenyan slum dwellers cram into a 10-foot-by-20-foot "sanctuary" to worship the Lord Jesus Christ. It isn't pretty, but it is a church, a church made up of some of the poorest people on earth. But these folks' economic inferiority does not imply their spiritual inferiority. These people have no access to healthcare, but they call on the Lord to heal them, they have a level of trust in God's sovereignty that far surpasses so many of us. When these people pray, *Give us this day our daily bread*—they really mean it. They are trusting God to provide their most basic needs.

This little church has a 22-year-old worship leader named John, who miraculously managed to get through high school but could not afford to go to college. Filled with compassion for the children in the slum, he started a school in the church in which he personally teaches 50 kids spanning all the elementary grades. When he was asked how he was supported financially, he just smiled and said, "***There is nobody to pay me a salary. I just trust the Lord to meet***

my needs.”

In the bowels of this slum in Kenyan we find this little church, filled with spiritual giants who do not know where the next meal is coming from. Yet in the midst of their poverty and pain they worship God in joyous praise—this is total victory.

Believers, we must understand that whenever Christians will live as they ought to live in this world, where they will live righteous lives and aggressively seek to spread the Gospel and make disciples, when we stand for righteousness, the natural outcome will be suffering. Jesus wants His disciples to understand and expect suffering, so does Paul:

And indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. (2 Timothy 3:12 NASB)

This verse doesn't say: All Christians can expect persecution. What does it say? “All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” It is godliness that brings suffering. When you stand with God and speak out against sin, when you speak out against abortion, homosexuality, same sex marriages, immorality, you are going to suffer for it, expect it!

In several passages Paul writes with the assumption that suffering and affliction are a necessary part of an apostolic ministry. But in other passages Paul does not limit suffering and affliction to just the apostles ministries. He assumes that it is an essential part of discipleship. This is the consistent emphasis of Scripture – that inseparably joined to discipleship are hardship, trial and difficulty, conflict and pain.

Let's look at some modern day disciples and the suffering they are undergoing.

This past November, 2007 in a highly unusual press conference in Pyongyang in September, the National Security Service of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) announced the arrest of “foreign spies” and “native citizens working for a foreign intelligence service.” [The Voice of the Martyrs](#) (VOM), a ministry serving Christians in restricted nations who are persecuted for their faith, announced that those arrested in North Korea were in fact Christian believers and not spies.

❖ *“Following Jesus Christ is considered treason in North Korea, where the government mandates that worship is reserved for deceased dictator Kim Il Sung and his son, the current dictator, Kim Jong Il,” said Todd Nettleton, spokesperson for VOM. “The Voice of the Martyrs is proud to stand with Christ's followers in North Korea, and deeply concerned for the well-being of our brothers and sisters there. We call on the North Korean government to release these Christian believers, who were involved in legitimate business activities to support themselves and their families.”*

In China on January 26, 2007, 76-year-old [Shuang Shuying](#) and her son, house church leader Hua Huiqi, were attacked, wounded and arrested by police while walking near a 2008 Olympic hotel site in Beijing. Shuying has numerous medical problems and is serving two years in prison.

In Lao People's Democratic Republic, [Pastor Van Thong](#) and 11 other local pastors were arrested on November 26, 2006, for attending meetings organized by Christian leaders from the West. Van Thong is the head of Lao Evangelical Church in his province. He has been denied visitors and is being held indefinitely.



In Indonesia in April 2007, Evangelist Daniel and more than 40 Christian leaders in Indonesia were arrested after a video recording of them praying for Muslims and the Quran was leaked to Islamic organizations. Evangelist Daniel was sentenced to five years in prison for praying, *“Father we pray for the leaders of the madrassa, so their hearts would be open for gospel.”*

The number of Christian martyrs, those who have died for their faith in Christ, in the last century alone is greater

then all the other centuries combined. Every year some 156,000 Christians are killed because of their faith. Also, nearly two thirds of the world's population lives under governments that persecute Christians for their faith in Christ. We should realize that while being a Christian in the United States is not a life threatening thing, for the majority of the world's Christians, it is.

Believers we must understand that pain and suffering and poverty are part of life, and becoming a Christian does not make them all go away. Our wise, Holy and loving God has a purpose in pain and suffering. Notice what Paul tells the Corinthians:

For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came to us in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life; (2 Corinthians 1:8 NASB)

This doesn't sound like the total victory that Joel talks about. But Paul tells us why they were suffering, please get this:

indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves in order that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead; (2 Corinthians 1:9 NASB)

Believers suffering weans us from the sin of self-reliance. Many men and women have testified that God taught them this lesson, that they are dependant upon Him, by taking away all the things they had mistakenly depended on. Much of the pain we experience is to bring about continued dependence on the grace and power of God. Suffering is designed to cause us to walk by God's ability, power, and provision; rather than by our own. It causes us to turn from our resources to His resources.

Listen believers, when the sun is shining, when the sky is blue, when you are feeling great, when you have plenty of money, when you love everybody and everybody loves you there is a tendency to ignore God. There is a tendency to trust ourselves and to just about totally forget God. This is why God warned the Israelites about prosperity:

"Beware lest you forget the LORD your God by not keeping His commandments and His ordinances and His statutes which I am commanding you today; (Deuteronomy 8:11 NASB)

God is here warning the Israelites, He is not warning them of the dangers of poverty but of wealth.

lest, when you have eaten and are satisfied, and have built good houses and lived in them,¹³ and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and gold multiply, and all that you have multiplies,¹⁴ then your heart becomes proud, and you forget the LORD your God who brought you out from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. (Deuteronomy 8:12-14 NASB)

Notice that it is wealth, not poverty that causes them to be proud and forget the Lord.

We see this same idea in Proverbs:

Keep deception and lies far from me, Give me neither poverty nor riches; Feed me with the food that is my portion,⁹ lest I be full and deny Thee and say, "Who is the LORD?" Or lest I be in want and steal, And profane the name of my God. (Proverbs 30:8-9 NASB)

There is a danger of denying the Lord when we are full, when all is well.

Believers the truth is that life for a believer can be quite difficult. God does not promise us health and wealth, He promises us that if we live godly lives we will be persecuted. The Gospel message is not about you living in total victor over poverty and disease and bad relationships. The Gospel is about God putting His only beloved son to

death to pay the sin debt of all who will trust in Him. God does not promise us a life of wealth and comfort, He promises us eternal life.

God wants us to trust Him, to live in dependence upon Him and it is the trials of life that help us to do just that.

So we have seen that Jesus didn't live in the total victory that Joel preaches and neither did the Apostles or the saints down through the years. When you go to the Scriptures you see that the health/wealth message is not biblical. So why is it that so many are buying into this false message? I think the main reason is because it sounds so good. Who doesn't want to always be healthy, wealthy and problem free? So it sounds good and the second reason is because so few people know their Bibles they think that this is what God wants for them. Believers we need to know and stand on the truth of God's word that we may be a voice of reason in the midst of this unbiblical teaching.

Do you know that we have a letter written to a suffering church in the New Testament which shows us exactly how God feels about suffering and poverty? What is the name of this church? Where is it found? We'll look at that next week.

This message was preached by [David B. Curtis](#) on January 27, 2008. Media #400.



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Chesapeake, VA 23322