

# A DESTRUCTIVE GOSPEL

## PART 2

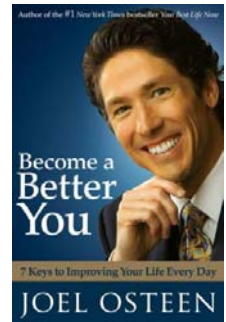
### Revelation 2:8-11



We looked last week at the health/wealth gospel, which I called a destructive gospel. The proponents of this gospel teach that God wants all believers to be healthy, wealthy, pain free and to prosper in whatever they do. That sounds like good news but the only problem with it is that it isn't true—it's not what the Bible teaches.

What the preachers of this health/wealth gospel do is to replace what the Bible actually has to say about wealth, with what our culture says about wealth and prosperity. And of course when you preach a message that is heard as saying

"God wants you rich" then of course the implication is that the Gospel message is really all about us, and ways to get God to fulfill not merely our needs and desires but even our self-centered acquisitive dreams. Their real center of existence is not God. They only relate to God for what they can get out of God. Their real center of existence is their own prosperity and life style—"God bless my standard of living".



We talked last week about one of the prosperity preachers, [Joel Osteen](#). There are many of these preachers but we talked about Osteen because he has the largest congregation in the country. His syndicated TV program is the most-watched religious broadcast in the nation, with 7 million viewers. It also airs in more than 100 foreign countries. His first book, 2004's [Your Best Life Now: 7 Steps to Living at Your Full Potential](#), sold more than 4 million copies, and his latest, [Become a Better You: 7 Keys to Improving Your Life Every Day](#) for which he got a \$13-million advance, had a first printing of 3 million copies, reportedly the largest ever in Simon & Schuster's history.

Osteen's popularity is pushing this health/wealth gospel to all of churchanity. The reason Osteen is so popular is because of the spiritual infantilism of America. Not just spiritual, the infantilism of American culture, he feeds the Paris Hilton, Britney Spears culture. It's all me. Benefit me. What can it do for me? How can I feel better? What can I do about me? How you can get the best of your life? It's all "me"-centered.

As one might guess, the teachings of the Faith movement are very attractive to some. If we can produce whatever our hearts desire by simply demanding what we want by faith, if we can manipulate the universe and perhaps even God, then we have our own personal genie just waiting to fulfill our wishes.

We looked last week at Joel's comments on finances: *"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."*

So according to Joel, we as God's children shouldn't struggle financially. One thing that I don't think I emphasized last week was that the way Joel teaches that you obtain wealth. Do you know how to get wealthy according to these prosperity preachers? You get rich by giving money to them. Then God is so pleased with you for contributing to their over indulgent lifestyles that God will give you back a bunch more money.

Listen to what Joel says in a letter from his ministry in 2005;

*Sometimes it is hard for us to grasp that God wants us to prosper in every way...God wants us to prosper financially, to have plenty of money, to fulfill the destiny He has laid out for us. One of the most important Biblical principles that shows us how to prosper is the principle of sowing and reaping...*

*People tell me, "Joel, He is God. If He wants to bless me, He can." Friend, God works by laws. You can't expect to reap a harvest without first planting your seeds. If you will be faithful and do what God is asking you to do, God will do His part. Don't let the enemy deceive you into holding on to your seed—get it into the ground!*

*As you read this, God may be speaking to your heart. Trust that He will direct you how and where He wants you to sow your seed. If you are moved to send a seed gift in the enclosed reply envelope...*

So if you want to be rich you have to give your money to Joel. If you want to get wealthy then you have to give to a wealthy person. Is this what the Bible teaches? Nothing could be further from the truth. The Bible teaches, almost on every page, that we are to help the poor, take care of the poor. In fact, the Bible teaches the direct contrary of what is taught by the "prosperity preachers". The Bible does not say anywhere that we will get rich, if we give to the rich. In fact, the Bible says the very opposite:

***He who oppresses the poor to make much for himself or who gives to the rich, will only come to poverty. (Proverbs 22:16 NASB)***

This word "poverty", used here actually means, in the original language, extreme poverty. So, far from promising us riches, God actually says the exact opposite. [[machcowr](#) – רושמי]

Let me read you an excerpt for the web sight "[Daylight Atheism](#)"; this is what unbelievers have to say about the [Prosperity Gospel](#).

*The central theme of the prosperity gospel is that if you donate and tithe generously to God - which invariably means donating and tithing generously to the specific person telling you this - then God will reward your faithfulness by repaying your investment many times over. Their catch phrase is "name it and claim it" indicating that the true believer will receive anything they ask for in faith. (Except for its extra helpings of Jesus, the prosperity gospel is almost identical to the New Age movement spearheaded by The Secret, right down to the claim that you get whatever you think about, whether it is good or bad.)*

*Word of Faith preachers include [Creflo Dollar](#) (yes, that is his real name, apparently), Kenneth Copeland, Robert Tilton (whose website advertises a book titled How to Pay Your Bills Supernaturally), Joel Osteen, Jan and Paul Crouch, and others. All of these preachers tout the fabulous, dazzling riches just waiting to be claimed by believers, available now for one easy monthly payment of 10% of your gross income (gross, not net - people who tithe from their net income hate the baby Jesus). Call now, operators are standing by.*

*The Christian Bible, with its constant injunctions against wealth and privilege, seems like the unlikeliest soil for such an unabashedly materialistic theology of greed to take root. The ludicrously tortured reinterpretations which followers of this gospel put forth should evoke nothing but laughter from anyone with an ounce of rational sense.*

Amen! And that is from an unbeliever! Even an unbeliever knows that this prosperity teaching does not line up with the Scriptures.

*Joel said, "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 its 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."*

So, I'm not supposed to ever be sick? I'm supposed to stand against pain in my body? Believers are never to have cancer, or high blood pressure? Where does the Bible teach that God wants every believer totally healthy? Listen to what God said to Moses:

***And the LORD said to him, "Who has made man's mouth? Or who makes him dumb or deaf, or seeing or blind? Is it not I, the LORD?" (Exodus 4:11 NASB)***

When Paul's disciple Timothy was suffering with stomach problems Paul didn't say, "You need to stand against it Timothy, you need to claim your health." What he did tell him was:

***No longer drink water exclusively, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments. (1 Timothy 5:23 NASB)***

Osteen's teaching is far from the Bibles but that is probably because Osteen doesn't worry about theology. Osteen says' *"Make church relevant, give them something to be able to take away. I find today people are not looking for theology. There's a place for it, [But] in your everyday life you need to know how to live."*

Well that is obvious because if they were they would not find any sound theology at Lakewood! Although he does not reveal to the readers where he found this astonishing fact out, it appears the folks he has talked to have no interest in theology.

Let me remind you that theology simply means: "the knowledge of God." In essence Osteen has said that people are really not interested in learning about God. Somehow he has made a disconnect between knowing the God of the Bible via sound biblical theology and "knowing how to live." This is a mistake made by many. Listen believers, the more accurately you understand God within the biblical context the better life you will live before Him.

Listen to what else America's preacher is teaching his huge flock; In his sermon ***"Increasing in Favor"*** (available on his web site) Osteen says, *"I believe one of the main ways that we grow in favor is by declaring it. It's not enough to just read it it's not enough to just believe it. You've got to speak it out. Your words have creative power. And one of the primary ways we release our faith is through our words. And there is a divine connection between you declaring God's favor and you seeing God's favor manifest in your life...You've got to give life to your faith by speaking it out."*

In keeping with the erroneous idea of using some positive thinking to get what you want in life, Osteen preaches the [Kenneth Hagin/Charles Capps](#) idea that we can get what we want from God by our faith-filled words. This entire sermon was on how as a child of God we should be receiving ***"preferential treatment"*** by everyone. He testified about how he had been pulled over a couple of times for speeding but when the officer saw his last name was Osteen, no ticket was issued. He said the same can happen for every Christian who wakes up declaring they have God's favor. By following this method Osteen says he has been able to get the best parking spot in a crowded parking lot, a first class seat on a crowded airplane with no boarding pass, and priority seating at restaurants.

It's no wonder that people are flocking to here Osteen's message of health and prosperity. In this system God is a celestial Santa Claus that wants to meet our every greed. This teaching is so far from what the Bible teaches that only the Bible ignorant can buy into it. Where in Scripture did Jesus tell His disciples that if they confessed it with their mouth they would grow in favor? Notice what Jesus did teach His disciples:

***"If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. <sup>19</sup> "If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. (John 15:18-19 NASB)***

Notice what Paul told the Philippian believers:

***For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake, (Philippians 1:29 NASB)***

The verse says, "***It has been granted***" – that is the Greek verb *charizomai*, which comes from *charis*, which means: "grace." So *charizomai* is grace. [Vines Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words](#) says, "*Charizomai primarily denotes to show favor or kindness as in Galatians 3:18; to give freely, bestow graciously.*" Paul is saying that suffering is a gift of God's grace. Do you think of your times of trouble as a "gift" of God's grace? Not likely. And that's our problem—we don't understand that suffering is a gift. God says that it is, do you believe Him or do you believe Joel?

The Bible teaches 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, the natural outcome will be suffering. Paul wants the Philippians to understand and expect suffering.

We saw in our study last week that Jesus didn't live in the total victory that Joel preaches and neither did the Apostles. They had problems with relationships, they were not wealthy and they had physical problems. We also have a letter written to a suffering church in the New Testament which shows us exactly how God feels about suffering and poverty. The name of that church was Smyrna! Let's look at what the Lord said to this poor suffering church. In this little letter we see exactly what God's view is on His children suffering and being poor.

***"And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life, says this: (Revelation 2:8 NASB)***

The book of Revelation is addressed to seven churches as we see in [Revelation 1:4](#); these churches are named in [Revelation 1:11](#). Seven represents qualitative fullness, completeness, totality, perfection. Remember to a Hebrew numbers are first and foremost symbolic. These seven churches give us God's word to His church.

Notice that this letter is addressed "***to the angel of the church in Smyrna.***" Who is the angel of the church? Since the Hebrew Christians were not completely removed from Jerusalem until well into the second century, for its first one hundred years, the church remained very much a part of first century Judaism, and its leaders stayed involved in many Jewish affairs. There was no immediate split from the synagogue. The structure of the local synagogues was carried over directly into the structure of the early church.

*"In the synagogue there was a public minister of the synagogue called a chazen who prayed, preached behind a wooden pulpit, and took care of the general oversight of the reading of the Law and other congregational duties. He did not read the Law, but stood by the one who did, to correct and oversee, ensuring that it was done properly. He selected seven readers each week who were well-educated in the Hebrew Scriptures. The group consisted of one priest, one Levite, and five regular Israelites (Luke 4:16). The terms overseer of the congregation, angel of the church, and minister of the synagogue all referred to this position" (Lightfoot, Vol. 11, 89-99; Revelation 3:1, 7, 14).*

The word [Smyrna](#) is the word that is translated in the English language to myrrh; Smyrna means: "*myrrh.*" Smyrna is used three times in the New Testament outside Revelation, and each time it is translated as myrrh ([Matthew 2:11](#), [Mark 15:23](#), [John 19:39](#)).

The city's name is significant because the essence of myrrh came as a result of crushing a certain plant. Crushing resulted in a fragrant spice that was very valuable. Keep in mind that the fragrance of myrrh comes from crushing the plant. Since myrrh symbolizes suffering, it is fitting that the suffering church be located in Smyrna. The crushed, suffering church is the fragrant church. The more we are crushed, the more we run to Jesus. Suffering causes us to trust and depend upon Him.

*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;<sup>9</sup> 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 1:8-9 NASB)

We saw last week that there is a danger in prosperity—a danger of forsaking the Lord. But suffering causes us to trust Him. God wants His children's trust.

This letter follows the pattern of the other letters; after the church is identified, the Correspondent is described. To this faithful church, suffering mightily under the persecutions of these unbelievers, Jesus announces Himself as the First and the Last, a name for God taken from Isaiah:

*"Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel And his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: 'I am the first and I am the last, And there is no God besides Me.* (Isaiah 44:6 NASB)

*"Listen to Me, O Jacob, even Israel whom I called; I am He, I am the first, I am also the last.* (Isaiah 48:12 NASB)

The contexts of those verses reveals that the expression identifies God as the supreme Lord and determiner of history, the planner and controller of all reality. The Biblical doctrine of predestination, when rightly understood, is a source of comfort and assurance to the believer because the Christian who understands the truth of God's sovereignty is assured that nothing in his life is without meaning and purpose. God has ordained all things for His glory and for the believer's ultimate good. This means that even our sufferings are part of a consistent plan.

*so that no man may be disturbed by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we have been destined for this.* (1 Thessalonians 3:3 NASB)

Do you see what that says? God had destined the Thessalonians for afflictions. Is that what God says? But Joel says, "*God wants us to prosper financially, to have plenty of money, to fulfill the destiny He has laid out for us.*" Joel says that the destiny of believers is to have plenty but God says that the destiny of the Thessalonians was affliction.

*And we know that God causes all things [even suffering and persecution] to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.* (Romans 8:28 NASB)

Not only is Christ the First and the Last, but He "*was dead, and came to life*": He is completely victorious over death and the grave as the first fruits of all those who die in the Lord:

*But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep.<sup>21</sup> For since by a man came death, by a man also came the resurrection of the dead.<sup>22</sup> For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all shall be made alive.* (1 Corinthians 15:20-22 NASB)

Christ's resurrection guarantees our eternal life, so that even "death is swallowed up in victory" (1 Cor. 15:54). Regardless of the force and cruelty of their persecutors, the Christians in Smyrna could not be defeated, either in this life or the next.

After Christ identifies Himself, He commends the church at Smyrna with a series of "*I know*" statements which center around suffering:

*'I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.* (Revelation 2:9 NASB)

It wasn't easy to be a Christian in Smyrna, and the Lord knew this. The Lord knows all about our suffering because He knows from personal experience what it is to suffer and die:

***For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. (Hebrews 4:15 NASB)***

He knows everything that we are going through and He is working it for our good.

Christ says to them, "***I know your tribulation;***" the Greek word for tribulation is *thlipsis* [θλιψις] and it means: "*pressure, affliction, anguish, burdened, persecution, tribulation, trouble.*" The word originally meant crushing beneath a weight. Do you see the significance? The little church of myrrh was being crushed.

Christ also says, "***I know your poverty.***" In Greek there are two words for poverty. *Penia* describes the state of the man who is not wealthy and who must satisfy his needs with his own hands. *Ptocheia* [ptocheia] describes complete destitution. It has been put this way—*penia* describes the state of the man who has nothing superfluous; *ptocheia* describes the state of the man who has nothing at all. *Ptocheia* is the poverty of the church at Smyrna.

The linking of tribulation and poverty suggests a close connection between the two. They may have been the victims of mob violence and looting because of their faith as the Hebrews were:

***For you showed sympathy to the prisoners, and accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and an abiding one. (Hebrews 10:34 NASB)***

It is also likely that these believers in Smyrna were the objects of an economic boycott because they refused to align themselves with either the pagan State-worshippers or the apostate Jews.

Now if the health/wealth gospel is correct the next thing that the Lord should say to this church is "start confessing your victory, speak forth your faith and create better circumstance for yourselves." Or maybe the Lord should have said, "You are suffering and in abstract poverty because your faith is weak, if you have faith you would be rich."

But notice what the Lord really says to this suffering poverty stricken church:

***'I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. (Revelation 2:9 NASB)***

Immediately after noting Smyrna's tribulation and poverty, Christ says, "***But thou art rich***". Their poverty was material: **Spiritually they were rich!** Which means that their persecutions and poverty weren't because they lacked faith. James wrote something very similar to a group of poor, yet rich believers:

***Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? (James 2:5 NASB)***

The believer is the richest person on earth; he has something no money can buy—eternal life. God chose the poor to be rich in what? Rich in faith!

Because these believers would not submit to the worship of Rome ("receive the mark of the beast"), they were severely persecuted. Believers please understand this, they were being persecuted for living a godly Christian life. Their obedience to Christ was not bringing them health and wealth but suffering and death.

The martyrdom of [Polycarp](#) clearly documents this hostility. Polycarp was a bishop at the church of Smyrna. A

letter from the church at Smyrna to the churches in the Christian world related that Jews joined with pagans in clamoring that Polycarp should be cast to the lions or burned alive. His whereabouts was betrayed by a slave who collapsed under torture. They came and arrested him. Not even the police captain wished to see Polycarp die. On the brief trip to the city, he pled with the old man: What harm is it to say, "Caesar is Lord" and to offer sacrifice and be saved? But Polycarp was adamant that for him only Jesus Christ was Lord. When he entered the arena the proconsul gave him the choice of cursing the name of Christ and making sacrifice to Caesar or death. *"Eighty and six years have I served Him, said Polycarp, and He has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?"* The proconsul threatened him with burning, and Polycarp replied: *"You threaten me with the fire that burns for a time, and is quickly quenched, for you do not know the fire that awaits the wicked in the judgment to come and in everlasting punishment. Why are you waiting? Come, do what you will."* As they came to bind him to the stake he requested not to be bound, so they left him unbound in the flames. Polycarp died for his faith in Christ. That was just one incident in the life of the church at Smyrna.

In the prosperity gospel the message of suffering has given way to the message of quick wealth. The "Christ" that is worshiped is not one who calls us to be holy but instead one who promises to make us "happy".

The Bible has much to say on the subject of wealth (almost exclusively in the form of warnings against the dangers inherent in possessing them), and it speaks volumes that the prosperity gospel people never want to look at. They don't look at the Bible as a whole, but only at certain select passages that serve their purpose.

The Lord knows all about the blasphemy of their persecutors as well: *"those who say they are Jews and are not"*. The Lord explicitly identifies the opposition faced by the early Church. The instigators of persecution were the Jews. Again and again in Acts we see how the Jews stirred up the authorities against the Christians. Many Jews hated Christianity with a passion and they went about trying to destroy Christians.

The Lord says that they claim to be Jews but they are not. This refers to the Israelites who rejected Christ and thus rejected the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Unbelieving Jews are not God's people: they are covenant-breaking apostates. Jew refers technically to the "people of God." Racially they were Jewish, but they were not the people of God. There is no such thing as an "orthodox" Jew, unless he is a Christian; for if Jews believed the Scriptures, they would believe in Christ. Paul put it this way Romans:

*For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. <sup>29</sup> But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God. (Romans 2:28-29 NASB)*

*But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel; (Romans 9:6 NASB)*

A Jewish heritage does not make a person one of God's people. God accounts Jewishness by the inward parts, by faith. [Galatians 3:7,16, 26](#), and [29](#) teach that by faith a Christian is the seed of Abraham and an heir of the promise. [Philippians 3:2-3](#) calls Jews the circumcision which was a technical designation for the people of God.

Who then is the true Jew? Who belongs to the true Israel? According to the clear teaching of the New Testament, the person who trusts in Jesus Christ, regardless of his ethnic heritage, is a Jew. But a racially Jewish congregation of apostates and persecutors is nothing more than a synagogue of Satan, our Lord says. Satan means: "Accuser" and early Christian history is rife with examples of Satanic false witness by the Jews against the Christian Church. The book of Acts records many of these instances:

*But the Jews aroused the devout women of prominence and the leading men of the city, and instigated a persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their district. (Acts 13:50 NASB)*

Christ underscores the false nature of the accusations by the statement that some of them would be cast into prison by the devil, meaning the slanderer.

Christ commends the church at Smyrna by taking note of their difficult circumstances and their spiritual wealth. In other letters the condemnation follows the commendation, but there is no condemnation for Smyrna! There is no fault found with this Church. Persecution has a purifying effect. This is a Christ honoring, God exalting church that is poor and suffering. But notice what Jesus says to the rich church:

***'Because you say, "I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing," and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked, (Revelation 3:17 NASB)***

So the prosperity teachers have it backwards, the poor are blessed! And the ones who say they are rich are wretched.

Because the One who knows their sufferings is also the First and the Last, the All-Controller, He can give authoritative comfort:

***'Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. (Revelation 2:10 NASB)***

Basically God is telling them—you are going to suffer, but don't be afraid. We will not fear suffering when we are trusting in God. David said in Psalms 56:

***When I am afraid, I will put my trust in Thee. <sup>4</sup> In God, whose word I praise, In God I have put my trust; I shall not be afraid. What can mere man do to me? (Psalms 56:3-4 NASB)***

Some of the Smyrnaean Christians would soon be cast into prison at the instigation of the Jews. The divinely ordained purpose for the devil's wicked activity was so that the believers at Smyrna might be tested (*Greek: peirazo*--to prove). It was quite a test of faith when the torturer would offer the victim opportunity to recant and thus obtain his freedom. Their true priorities were tested: were they spiritual or physical? Sometimes members of the victim's own household would beg him to denounce his faith and save his life. Persecuted believers might have been tempted to question God's goodness or justice. Strong faith trusts God in the midst of suffering and death. In [Job 13:15](#) Job said, ***"Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him"***. That's strong faith. And strong faith comes from knowing God--theology! The more we know Him the more we will trust Him. Christ continues His instruction with this promise: ***"and you will have tribulation ten days"***. The *days* in this book are what is commonly called *prophetic days*, meaning ten years. This was precisely the duration of the persecution under [Diocletian](#), during which all the Asiatic Churches were grievously afflicted. Others understand the expression as implying *frequency* and *abundance* as it does in other parts of Scripture.

***'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.'* (Revelation 2:11 NASB)**

The promises in each of these letters are found in Revelation 20-22. All of these promises refer to the blessing of the New Jerusalem.

Our perspective is very important, especially when we face suffering. That is why the prosperity gospel is so destructive. It causes its adherents to think if they are not healthy and wealthy that something is wrong with them. To many, suffering is a sign of a cruel god who enjoys seeing people suffer, or suffering results because a helpless god cannot relieve his people's afflictions. But to the person of faith, suffering and affliction are seen as the hand and purpose of an almighty and loving God moving His children toward maturity.



Believers, we must know Scripture, we must be Bereans and search out what we hear to see if it lines up with the word of God. The health/wealth gospel is very popular but it is not true, it is not biblical and we must stand against it. We must proclaim the true Gospel to a lost and dying world that needs not wealth and health but Christ.

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