



Dear friends in Christ Jesus,

It has been called the “*Theology of Glory*.” “*Health and Wealth Christianity*.” “*The Prosperity Gospel*.” “*Name-it and Claim-it Theology*.” Someone, not quite so complimentary called it “*Cotton Candy Theology*.” It’s the kind of theology championed by many televangelists. It packs churches and it glues viewers to the television screen. Here are a few sound-bites. “*God wants to increase you financially by giving you promotions, fresh ideas, and creativity*,” “*Even if you come from an extremely successful family, God still wants you to go further*.” “*Get rid of that small-minded thinking and start thinking as God thinks. Think big. Think increase. Think abundance. Think more than enough*.” “*It’s God’s will for you to live in prosperity instead of poverty. It’s God’s will for you to pay your bills and not be in debt*.”

Then here’s another sound bite slightly different. “*If you want to reap financial blessings, you have to sow financially*.” After that statement, the evangelist conveniently provides the phone number, so you can sow your seed with his or her ministry. He or she may even suggest to you the proper amount to send!

And then there are other sound bites, slightly different again. How about this one? “*If Jesus were here today, he wouldn’t be riding around on a donkey. He’d be taking a plane; he’d be using the media*.” Maybe so. If someone was kind enough to donate the ticket or the air-time. During his time on earth, Jesus once said, “*Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head*.” (Matthew 8:20) Jesus spent his days on earth dirt-poor. He was homeless. Knowing that, has Jesus really guaranteed the easy life, here and now, for you and me? Do the guarantees of *Health and Wealth Theology* match what the writer to the Hebrews tells us? Or does he teach us something quite different? Indeed, he does! **Saving Us Cost Jesus Everything!**

Would it surprise you to learn that the *Prosperity Gospel* is nothing new? Such ideas were floating around in the first-century as well. God’s own people, the nation of Israel, were—by and large—prisoners of such teachings. They had developed a whole theological framework around this notion. It was a framework built around their upside-down ideas about Messiah.

Back then the Jews of Jesus’ day knew—they just knew that Messiah was going to appear in the skies over Jerusalem and slowly and majestically descend into the courts of the great temple. He would raise his voice, and angelic armies would flock to his call. They would go out from the Holy City, rank upon rank, invincible in battle, to bring vengeance upon the Romans and upon all the enemies of the Jews. Then the King Messiah would rule the entire known world. Jerusalem would become the greatest city in the world. And God’s people, the Jews, would be living on easy street. There would be a kosher chicken in every pot. A top-of-the-line chariot with all the options in every driveway.

It was because of this misguided *theology of the crown* that the Jews really had no use for Jesus. Well, they did at first. They went gaga over the miracles he performed. Walking on water, healing lepers, giving sight to the blind, feeding the multitudes, even raising the dead—these were signs they interpreted to mean that their easy life was right around the corner. Kosher Chicken and bulging bank balances here we come!

But then Jesus burst their balloon. He wasn’t about to play Kingdom CEO or Jewish Commander-in-Chief. Jesus’ vision and mission were so much grander than that! So he dared to preach things like this: “*Amen, Amen, I tell you: You are not looking for me because you saw the miraculous signs, but because you ate the loaves and were filled*.²⁷ *Do not continue to work for the food that spoils, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For on him God the Father has placed his seal of approval. . . .*”³⁵ “*I am the Bread of Life*,” Jesus told them. “*The one who comes to me will never be hungry, and the one who believes in me will never be thirsty*...”⁴¹ “*So the Jews started grumbling about him, because he said, ‘I am the bread that came down from heaven’*...”⁶⁶ “*After this, many of his disciples turned back and were not walking with him anymore*.” (John 6:26-27, 35, 41, 66)

Even Jesus’ own apostles struggled with upside-down misconceptions about what Messiah would do. Even though Jesus, more than once, tried to set them straight. He taught the same Bible Class, over and over again. He preached the same sermon, and he used the same theme: “*The Son of Man is about to be betrayed into the hands of men*.²³ *They will kill him, but on the third day he will be raised*.” (Matthew 17:22-23) That’s pretty plain. **Jesus explained that saving us would cost him everything!** The Son of Man had come to serve, not be served. A ransom for sinners had to be paid. A life had to be laid down for the sins of the world. Jesus’ life, lifted up on the cross. (John 3:14)



But even the path to get to Christ's cross wasn't going to be easy. That's what the writer to the Hebrews shows us. He lets us glimpse some private moments in Jesus' life. Moments briefly mentioned in the Gospels. Those times when Jesus went off into the hills to pray. *"⁷In the days of his flesh, he offered prayers and pleas with loud cries and tears to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence."* *"The days of his flesh:"* that word *"flesh"* is talking about Jesus' state of humiliation. Not prosperity. Not a palace in Jerusalem staffed by minions at his beck and call. But a simple life: so simple that when it was over and our Lord hung on the cross, all our Lord possessed were the clothes on his back that had been stripped from him. The Roman soldiers divided them into four parts, except for the tunic that was woven in one piece from top to bottom. For that, they cast lots to see who would get it.

No health. No wealth. No easy life. But rather *"prayers and pleas with loud cries and tears."* The gospel writers don't provide us detailed examples of those prayers, those times when Jesus went off into the hills to pray. With one exception. In the Garden of Gethsemane. With the cross just hours in the future and the sins of the world already starting to crush down upon him, Jesus *"knelt down, and prayed,"* ⁴²*"Father, if you are willing, take this cup away from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done."* ⁴³*An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him.* ⁴⁴*As he was in agony, he prayed more fervently. His sweat became like great drops of blood falling to the ground."* (Luke 22:41-44)

Once that prayer time was over, Jesus left the Garden. His prayer was answered. The cross was waiting. And once he hung upon it, with loud cries and tears, Jesus prayed again. *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* Make no mistake. **Saving Us Cost Jesus Everything!**

It's a good thing that Jesus didn't subscribe to *Health and Wealth theology*. It's a good thing that Jesus didn't slip away from the mob in the Garden and board a plane for a nice, warm tropical island somewhere. (He's the Son of God. He could have *created* one! And by the way, if the Son of God is going to buy into *glory* theology, why would he mess around with a plane? He can fly on clouds. Wait a minute! He's *omnipresent*!) Jesus didn't look for the easy way out. There wasn't one. Only the cross could bring the crown. Only His life sacrificed—willingly, graciously—could complete his mission. The Father's mission. **Saving Us Had To Cost Jesus Everything!**

That's what the writer to the Hebrews is saying with these words: *"Although he was the Son, he learned obedience from the things he suffered. ⁹After he was brought to his goal, he became the source of eternal salvation for everyone who obeys him."* Even Jesus, the perfect and holy son of God, was blessed by the things he suffered. He accepted what His Father allowed to come into his life—good or bad. Even if that meant sacrificing himself for others. Even if that meant the cross. Even if that meant hell itself endured for you and me. Through it all, Jesus remained obedient. He trusted. He could still pray, *"Not my will, but yours be done."*

Will we pray that? The Savior who sacrificed everything for you and me never once promised: *"Become a believer, and you'll never be broke again. Or sick again. Become a believer, and you'll always be happy."* C. S. Lewis, author of The Chronicles of Narnia series and Christian apologist, once observed, *"I haven't always been a Christian. I didn't go to religion to make me happy. I always knew a bottle of Port would do that. If you want a religion to make you feel really comfortable, I certainly don't recommend Christianity."*

Why not? Because Jesus once said, *"If anyone wants to follow me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me."* (Matthew 16:24) Jesus' apostles once said, *"We must go through many troubles on our way to the kingdom of God."* (Acts 14:22) The mighty apostle Paul tells us, *"I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me, so that I would not become arrogant."* ⁸*Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that he would take it away from me."* Were Paul's prayers, just like those of Jesus, made with loud cries and tears? Yet, how did Paul's heavenly Father answer? *"⁹And he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, because my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore, I will be glad to boast all the more in my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may shelter me. ¹⁰That is why I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties, for the sake of Christ. For whenever I am weak, then am I strong."* (2 Corinthians 12:7-10)

Maybe our Father in heaven knows we need to be broke, dead-broke all our lives with never two nickels to rub together, because otherwise we'll forget that our real treasure is in heaven above. Maybe we need to be sick—even chronically ill—because our Father in heaven knows that when he's got us flat on our back on a hospital bed, the only way left to look will be straight up. Maybe we need to struggle with depression, because otherwise we'll stop focusing



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on our Lord and the joy only He can give in Christ. Maybe we need to fight loneliness, so that it means something when, from the pages of Scripture, we hear our Savior whisper, *"I am with you always."* (Matthew 28:20)

Maybe we need to stop behaving like spoiled little brats, expecting our Heavenly Father to coddle us every day and pop a silver spoon in our mouth as our pacifier. Maybe it's time for us to pull the memory verse out of the closet of our brain and tuck it away in our heart: *"We know that all things work together for the good of those who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose."* (Romans 8:28) And just in case we are tempted to forget that *"all things"* also includes everything we think is bad, maybe we ought to tuck a few more Bible verses into our heart: Verses penned by St. Paul, a summa cum laude graduate of the school of hard knocks. 2 Corinthians 4:7-10: *"⁷We hold this treasure in clay jars, to show that its extraordinary power is from God and not from us. ⁸We are hard pressed on every side, yet not crushed; perplexed, yet not despairing; ⁹persecuted, yet not forsaken; struck down, yet not destroyed. ¹⁰We always carry around in our body the death of the Lord Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body."*

The most important cross we carry is the cross of Christ in our hearts by faith. All our other crosses don't seem so heavy anymore, when we remember the cross on which Christ died, and when we remember our living Savior walks beside us through this life. And all our other crosses don't seem so unbearable anymore, when we trust there will be a crown. For it has been bought and paid for by the one who *offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears. By the one learned obedience from what he suffered. By the one who finished his work, and became the source of eternal salvation for everyone who believes in him. For you and me! Amen.*

Rev. Glenn Schwanke