

# 12 FAITHFUL MEN

*Portraits of Courageous Endurance  
in Pastoral Ministry*

COLLIN HANSEN and JEFF ROBINSON, EDS.



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## FOREWORD

Young pastors today are often cool, impressive, and popular. But the pastoral ministry that has borne eternal fruit down through the centuries has been something deeper, grander, and more resilient. The apostle Paul expresses it when he writes, “I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake” (Col. 1:24). Paul was not cool. He had something better. Into his pastoral ministry flowed two divine powers: suffering and rejoicing.

It is not enough that we pastors today suffer as Paul did. We must suffer without self-pity, resentment, or murmuring but with rejoicing. Then we advance the gospel. How could it be otherwise? We represent the One “who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross” (Heb. 12:2).

As a young pastor, I entered the ministry prepared for the rejoicing but not for the suffering. When the inevitable buffetings and sorrows came, especially in the form of rejection, I thought, *I don’t deserve this*. Maybe you’ve thought that too. And while it is a valid thought, it is not profound.

As the Lord led me further along, the following verses, like so many throughout Scripture, became more meaningful to me:

I am sending you out as lambs in the midst of wolves.  
(Luke 10:3)

Whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God.  
(John 16:2)

I have been crucified with Christ. (Gal. 2:20)

Do not be surprised at the fiery trial. (1 Pet. 4:12)

I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church. (Col. 1:24)

The Lord did not recruit pastors on false pretenses. He told us what to expect. We will suffer, for his sake. But for that very reason, because it is for him, our sufferings are a grace, a privilege, an honor he is giving us. We are following him down a path already stained with his priceless blood. When we realize this, a second thought breaks upon us: *I really don't deserve this.* And that is profound, and it leads to profound rejoicing.

The privilege of pastoral ministry is *Jesus*—serving Jesus, standing for Jesus, representing Jesus, laying down our lives for Jesus, and through it all knowing Jesus more deeply. As my dad, the best pastor I've ever known, told me on his dying day: “Ministry isn’t everything. Jesus is.”

Collin Hansen and Jeff Robinson have gathered together godly pastors to tell us stories, true stories, of pastoral suffering

*Foreword*

with rejoicing that bears fruit to last forever. We pastors of today can never say the Lord is asking too much of us. The pastors we read of here proved that Jesus is worth it all, even to our hearts' full rejoicing forever.

Ray Ortlund  
Immanuel Church  
Nashville, Tennessee  
August 28, 2017

# ONE

## PAUL: Apostle of Pastoral Affliction

JEFF ROBINSON

If you sent a résumé to a search committee to be considered for a pastoral opening, what types of information would it contain? No doubt it would detail all the positive ministry experience you have logged. If you had served as a pastor in one place for a few years, you'd put that first, particularly if things went fairly well. If you worked as a youth minister while in college, you'd put that down. If you taught a Bible class or served a short-term mission stint overseas, that would certainly make the list. You would include the names and contact information for several people likely to give a friendly assessment of your qualifications, character, and background.

Your aim would be to make certain your strengths stand out in bold relief so you would appear—on paper at least—better qualified than the other candidates.

A band of “super-apostles” forced the apostle Paul to brandish his ministry credentials late in his second letter to the church at Corinth. Thus, in 2 Corinthians 11, Paul provided his pastoral résumé, boasting in a rather lengthy set of qualifications that authenticated him as an apostle called and inspired by God. What made Paul’s ministry vitae?

Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant? If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. (vv. 23–30)

Paul’s ministry qualifications read like the diary of an Auschwitz survivor: imprisonment on false charges, flogging, starvation, shipwrecked, hard labor, robbed, sleepless nights—all things that portray him as a weak man. Why? Because, as Paul goes on to tell the Corinthians in chapter 12, he was called to suffer. The gospel’s work moves forward and the church gets built on the tracks of suffering, which demonstrate God’s power working through the conduit of

human frailty. When I am tempted to throw a pity party over some trifling anguish I’m facing in ministry, I go to Paul’s account here to put it in perspective. I will never suffer this way for Christ. Compared to this, all is well.

It is clear from Paul’s writing in 2 Corinthians and in other epistles that he expected all faithful ministers to experience some level of affliction. In 2 Timothy 2:3, Paul commanded that Timothy, his son in the faith, “share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus.”

As a herald of the gospel of Jesus Christ, I am called to suffer.

### **Suffering: Normative for Pastors**

Throughout the history of the church of Jesus Christ, a pattern has emerged. Those whom God has used profoundly to build his church suffered grinding affliction along the way. The church father Athanasius (AD 296–373) was exiled five times on accusations of heresy. Dozens of early believers were burned at the stake or fed to lions. John Calvin (1509–64) lived much of his life under a threat of death from the Roman Catholic Church. Puritan pastor John Bunyan (1628–88) wrote *Pilgrim’s Progress* during a twelve-year imprisonment for preaching the gospel. Charles Spurgeon (1834–92) lived in constant physical pain and suffered profound anxiety for boldly upholding God’s Word in the face of rising liberalism in the nineteenth century.

Scores of others, including those whose stories compose the remaining chapters of this book, lived out the famous dictum of A. W. Tozer (1897–1963): “It is doubtful whether God can bless a man greatly until he has hurt him deeply.”<sup>1</sup>

That is essentially the thesis of this book—before (or often while) God uses his ministers, he first fits them for gospel work with a harrowing walk along the Calvary Road of suffering. The apostle Paul is something of a biblical paradigm of the suffering pastor. He detailed affliction in many of his letters, but teased it out in the greatest depth in 2 Corinthians. This chapter will make six arguments, mostly from Paul’s witness in 2 Corinthians, to show how God employs suffering not only to fit his ministers for gospel ministry but also to proclaim that same gospel of grace to a lost and dying world.

Tom Schreiner crystalizes Paul’s self-understanding well:

We should not conceive of Paul as engaging in mission and experiencing the unfortunate consequence of suffering in the process, as if his difficulties were unrelated to his mission. On the contrary, the pain Paul endured was the means by which the message of the gospel was extended to the nations. Suffering was not a side effect of the Pauline mission; rather it was at the very center of his apostolic evangelism. His distress validated and legitimated his message, demonstrating the truth of the gospel.<sup>2</sup>

God promised Paul suffering in Acts 9:15–16, “But the Lord said to [Ananias], ‘Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.’”

It is vital that ministers recognize this promise early in their ministries, else they may be tempted to quit when things don’t go as planned. Suffering will either confirm their calling or drive them from ministry.

## **Pastors in the Hands of an Angry God?**

When a season of suffering sets in, pastors tend to wonder if something in the cosmos is out of kilter. Perhaps God is angry with me. Maybe his hand is not on my ministry. Maybe I need to microexamine myself as a young Martin Luther did to see if undetected sin has caused God to write “Ichabod” over the door of my life and ministry.

The super-apostles seemed to believe Paul’s troubles were ironclad evidence of God’s displeasure with him; surely one who boasts in such things as floggings and hunger has lost his mind and has, in fact, been abandoned by God. But Paul argued nothing could be further from the truth. Instead, affliction might provide key evidence that God is, in fact, with his ministers. Through suffering, Paul learned six key lessons about faithfulness every pastor ought to take to heart early in their ministry.

### ***Paul’s Suffering Taught Him How to Minister Gospel Compassion to Others***

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort. (2 Cor. 1:3–7)

My wife and I had never been able to relate to the many families around us who suffered through failed pregnancies until our first son died in Lisa's womb in the fall of 1999 after five months. We were planning on naming him after my distant cousin, baseball great Brooks Robinson, in hopes God would give him that same baseball gene. In the years that followed, we were amazed at how many friends came to us for counsel and encouragement after losing a child in utero.

I had never really been able to relate to fellow pastors whose ministries exploded like Mount Vesuvius until mine did two years into my first pastorate. Previously, the best I could do was offer some Reformed-sounding platitudes featuring the Puritans, Spurgeon, and maybe Corrie ten Boom, assuring them that these saints suffered and we must too. But my words fell with a thud; I knew not of what I spoke.

We don't fully understand affliction and God's unbending faithfulness in the cauldron until we've spent time boiling in it. God remedies this lack in his servants as the apostle learned ad nauseam. Paul and Barnabas strengthened the churches at Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, and Pisidian Antioch and instructed Christians to remain true to Christ, assuring them "that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). How were they to become kingdom citizens? Surely through Christ alone but also through trials. But Paul assured his readers that God would be with them in the furnace—as he had the Hebrew boys in Daniel 3. In turn, they would then be able to assure anxious believers of the faithfulness, love, and mercy of God who promised never to leave nor forsake his people (Heb. 13:5).

Pastoral ministry is not a shelter from the storm of this fallen world. Rather, it is a call to plunge headlong into it.

God calls his servants to run to the battle, not away from it. And God sees us through difficult times so we can provide the sheep with the comfort that comes from trusting fully in the kind purposes of the good shepherd. Calvin rightly refers to this as “the fellowship of suffering.”<sup>3</sup>

Just as the disciples picked up twelve baskets full of leftovers at the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus will not waste your suffering. He will use it to make you a compassionate shepherd in the local church for his glory as you experience the same aspects of the fallen world as do members of your congregation.

God’s fashioning of his leaders through affliction is the gospel-centered path to maturity. Don Carson asserts: “The most mature Christian leaders want to absorb an additional share of sufferings so that their flocks may correspondingly be spared some suffering. In this, they imitate Christ.”<sup>4</sup>

#### *Paul’s Suffering Demonstrated Human Weakness and the Power of God*

But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed. (2 Cor. 4:7–9)

There is nothing fetching about paper plates—even those with “heavy duty” stamped on the package. They are utilitarian, designed for a single purpose—to hold food and allow the user to successfully consume the food. Then they are thrown in the garbage.

In 2 Corinthians 4:7, Paul says pastors are kind of like cheap crockery—mere clay pots. God uses them to display

and deploy a precious and powerful message—the gospel. Through this ordinary means, God proclaims his extraordinary gospel to show that the meal, and not the plate, ultimately nourishes believers.

And the clay pots are vessels God subjects to suffering. But he brings them through it unspoiled and intact to demonstrate that the power to save sinners and preserve pastors belongs entirely to him.

Paul endured all manner of physical affliction, which he cataloged in verses 8–9, adding that because of God’s grace, none of them destroyed him: “Afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.” Like Paul, all human heralds are weak, but God’s power is not short-circuited by their weakness.

Why did God strike Paul with such angry waves? “To show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.” By suffering on behalf of his Lord, Paul carries in his body the dying of Jesus. In Galatians 6:17, Paul makes clear that he bears in his body “the marks of Jesus.” Schreiner comments on this passage: “Paul’s commitment to suffer and die for Christ is the means by which the strength of Jesus and his life are revealed through Paul.”<sup>5</sup>

John Bunyan, whom you will encounter in a later chapter, illustrates this point particularly well. The Puritan preacher was arrested in 1661 for preaching in a service outside the officially sanctioned state church. He spent twelve years in a squalid Bedford jail and wrote many great works, including *Pilgrim’s Progress*, the second bestselling book of all time after the Bible. Bunyan was not an educated man. He never spent a single day in seminary. He was a tinker—a repairer

of pots and pans—who ministered in the rural town of Bedford, England. Yet God continues to speak to millions today through his printed works. A powerful man? No. A clay pot? Yes. When told he could go home if he promised to stop preaching Christ as a separatist minister, Bunyan reportedly responded, “If I were out of prison today, I would preach the gospel again tomorrow by the help of God.”<sup>6</sup>

By human reckoning, God’s entire project of redemption appears weak. Jesus was born in a lowly stable to unremarkable parents and lived an obscure life. He was eventually nailed to a cross between two thieves and buried in a borrowed tomb. Many throughout history have dismissed Christianity and its crucified Christ as a weak religion for weak people.

Indeed, in one important sense, these critics are correct. Like Paul, like the tinker of Bedford, all of us are clay pots, weak people. If sinners will be transformed, God must do it. And he will strike the clay pot along the way to prepare it for difficult work.

God saved sinners through the affliction of his apostle. But he also made Paul’s feet stand firm in the midst of it all. Paul expresses this dynamic in a series of contrasting couplets: he was afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed. My favorite is the second one: “perplexed, but not driven to despair.” I have often been perplexed in the ministry. What is God doing? Why is he doing it this way? More times than not, I’ve been mystified at God’s ways. But each time I have come to Paul’s words here. Like drinking water from an oasis in a desert, I drew fresh stores of grace from “but not driven to despair” and was refreshed to persevere.

God's servants will suffer, but he will not let them go. He is demonstrating his awesome power through their astonishing powerlessness.

*Paul's Suffering Illustrated the Gospel He Was Called to Proclaim*

[We are] always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you.  
(2 Cor. 4:10–12)

I'm not a big fan of the aphorism often (and erroneously) attributed to St. Francis of Assisi: "Preach the gospel at all times, use words if necessary." It's a well-intended cliché, but God has commanded gospel heralds to use words. He has invested his Word with transforming power. Paul's call to proclaim Christ certainly required words, but to his mind it also entailed something else: a willingness to die for Christ. For Paul, gospel proclamation was a call to both preach and die because the words were illustrated by (and explained) the actions.

Paul was committed to suffer and die for the cause of Christ, and such a willingness turned out to be the means by which the death of Jesus was revealed through Paul. The super-apostles argued that signs and wonders were certain proof that the Spirit of God was at work. But Paul maintained that one must suffer for the life and death of Jesus to be illustrated. God was using Paul's suffering as an agent of life in the Corinthians. Schreiner writes, "Paul is again,

therefore, the corollary of Jesus, for just as Jesus died to convey life to his people, so too Paul must suffer for the life of God to be communicated to others.”<sup>7</sup>

The apostle was willing to sacrifice his own life to see the Corinthians converted, thereby providing a living parable of the very good news he preached. Death was coming to Paul’s body, but life was coming to the Corinthians through Christ. Contrary to the teaching of the super-apostles and their modern-day successors in the prosperity movement, every faithful gospel minister must be willing to sacrifice their life for the sake of the call to preach Christ. Acts 20:24 is something of a ministry manifesto for Paul: “I do not count my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.” We see this lived out in 2 Corinthians.

Paul’s doctrine here came home to me during the final weeks of my first pastorate. My church faced a terrible financial crisis. It could no longer afford my salary. I could find neither supplementary work nor full-time employment. After many weeks of prayer and counsel from other godly, wise men, I realized my only option was to resign. This text suddenly loomed large on the landscape of my life—was I willing to lay down even the ministry? In my farewell sermon, I preached John 12:24: “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” I prayed the congregation would see my point—I was seeking to live out Paul’s words in 2 Corinthians 4:10–12. It was painful, and in many ways it left me perplexed, but it wound up allowing the church to continue to exist.

As Paul's ministry proved, and as I pray my actions in some small way affirmed, suffering does not deny the gospel but confirms its truthfulness.

*Paul's Suffering Was a Means of Reorienting His Gaze to Eternal Things*

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. (2 Cor. 4:16–18)

As fallen humans, we tend to live for the moment. Our lives shrink down to the spontaneous thoughts, emotions, or needs that dominate our lives at a given place and time. Every crisis, no matter how small, can take on weight that far outstrips its true significance. As Paul David Tripp puts it:

In a moment, your thoughts can seem more important than they actually are. In a moment, your emotions can seem more reliable than they really are. In a moment, your needs can seem more essential than they truly are. . . . It's hard to live with eternity in view. Life does shrink to the moment again and again.<sup>8</sup>

This type of thinking often leads a pastor down the dark road of discouragement and through the doors of the dungeon of discontentment. A single email, text message, or phone call from a church member or deacon can push him into a mental spiral that leads to ten thousand speculative

disasters. Or an offhand comment from an elder about his preaching can cause the man to question his call to ministry.

Pastors are an insecure lot. Like all sons of Adam, they easily succumb to the world's pressure to succeed. Faithfulness is the biblical barometer of success in ministry, but the siren song of the world with its chorus of "more, faster, bigger, shinier" often clouds the mind of God's man.

In his mercy, God rescues his undershepherds from these dangerous roads by reorienting their gaze from temporal things to heavenly things. In Paul's ministry, affliction was the instrument God employed to redirect the apostle's focus. Though he suffered grievously, as the laundry list of trials in 2 Corinthians 11 shows, Paul dismissed his terrible circumstances as "light momentary affliction."

Multiple imprisonments for the cause of Christ? Light momentary affliction.

Countless beatings? Light momentary affliction.

Often near death in service of the gospel? Light momentary affliction.

Shipwrecked three times? Light momentary affliction.

Adrift at sea a day and a night? Light momentary affliction.

Often without food and water in cold and exposure? Light momentary affliction.

Under a threat of death from Jews and Gentiles alike?  
Light momentary affliction.

God did not waste Paul's affliction; it was the catalyst that took his eyes off this world and fixed them on another. Suffering stamped eternity on Paul's eyeballs and enabled him to see that this world is a dress rehearsal for another.

Paraphrasing Charles Spurgeon, the Lord's mercy often rides to the door of our hearts on the black stallion of affliction. Through suffering, God gave Paul eyes to see the dangerous, uncertain, transitory nature of the kingdom of humankind over against the glorious, certain, eternal nature of the kingdom of God. Compared to the glories of another realm, the personal disasters of this one are nothing.

*Paul's Suffering Proved the Integrity of His Ministry*

But as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love; by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything. (2 Cor. 6:4–10)

My dear friend and ministry hero Harry Reeder often says, “Circumstances do not shape character; they reveal it.” In 1 Thessalonians 1:5, Paul says his response to suffering showed the kind of man he was because only a Spirit-empowered person could suffer with joy, trusting that God had ordained his circumstances for good. Such joy could only be produced by the Spirit of God (v. 6). Paul was an authentic, Spirit-filled, divinely called herald of God.

Schreiner rightly argues that the effectiveness of the message relies heavily upon the integrity of the messenger: “The

effectiveness of the message of the cross is evacuated if the messengers are hucksters. On the other hand, proclaiming the gospel with integrity in the midst of suffering commends the gospel to the hearers.”<sup>9</sup>

Indeed.

Second Corinthians 6 is another curriculum vitae setting forth Paul’s ministerial qualifications. There, he lists ten elements of suffering in verses 4–5, then follows in verses 6–7 with nine elements of holiness.<sup>10</sup> In verses 8–10, he toggles back to nine additional types of suffering he’s experienced. Paul’s ministry is not so much validated by affliction as by the holiness it produces.

Just as the presence of semitrucks and other heavy vehicles will eventually reveal the cracks in the bulwark of a rusting, decaying bridge, so will extended bouts of affliction unmask a fake Christian or a false teacher. Paul had been broken, bruised, and battered. God’s grace caused him to stand anyway, thus proving his calling as a genuine apostle of God.

Seminary students and pastoral interns often ask me to help authenticate and discern their calling. Certainly we consult the qualifications of elders in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. But one certain indicator that God has called a man is that he stands firm and perseveres in ministry after he has been thoroughly buffeted by a hurricane of affliction. Paul suffered profoundly but pressed on in planting churches and proclaiming the gospel. This, he told the church at Corinth, separated him from the super-apostles. It proved the integrity and authenticity of his ministry.

The men profiled in subsequent chapters of this volume give further credence to Spurgeon’s notion. Calvin was run

out of Geneva but continued in the ministry until his death. Like Paul, Bunyan was jailed but wrote the second-most-famous Christian book in history from behind bars and later returned to shepherd his flock. Charles Simeon persevered in the face of a congregation that despised him.

*Paul’s Suffering Served as Dynamite That Destroyed Self-Glory*

So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Cor. 12:7–10)

Few Christians in the history of the church have experienced an encounter with God on a par with what Paul discusses in 2 Corinthians 12. Yet such an ecstatic vision of another world did not bolster Paul’s pride—the vision slayed it. How? After God gave Paul a preview of heaven, he afflicted the apostle with what Paul called a “thorn in my flesh.” Scripture is not clear as to the thorn’s identity, but it was given for Paul’s humility, to remind him that all his strength comes from the grace of God and not from himself. The thorn was God’s loving dynamite that destroyed Paul’s will to self-glory.<sup>11</sup>

Such a vision would certainly tempt even the most mature man of God toward seeking his own glory. Tweet it out, Face-

book it, offer it as a “praise report” at church, shout it from the rooftops. But the parasite of self-glory—so endemic to fallen human beings—drains the lifeblood and ultimately buries authentic gospel ministry. Self-glory builds self-kingdoms, but it also brings opposition from God: “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble” (1 Pet. 5:5).

Paul realized that one of the most important weapons a pastor must possess in ministry is humility. The problem is none of us is naturally humble. Thus, God in his grace gives us thorns to wage war on self-glory and promote humility.

It may be an irascible deacon board, a physical malady (many think that was Paul’s issue), a prodigal son, slim financial resources, depression and anxiety, cancer, the tragic death of your spouse or child, or any of a thousand other devastating realities. While our thorns may vary, God’s intent is the same—to humble us and to remind us of our utter dependence on him.

And like Paul, you may fervently and repeatedly pray for removal from your circumstances, but God will not change them due to a larger and infinitely more glorious plan that you do not see—namely, your decreasing and his increasing. And God will give you something even greater than removal of the thorn: his strength that shines through your weakness.

God exposed my weakness and exploded my self-glory early in the ministry. My first pastorate lasted barely three years. At times, it was a nightmare. One of my elders falsely accused me of wrongdoing. A woman in the church plotted to plant pornography in my vehicle (overheard and confronted by another member, thankfully). Seven families conspired to have me removed and replaced with a more “reformed” man. Two weeks before I resigned, another elder called for a

vote of confidence before the entire congregation (mercifully, they rejected his attempt) as my wife and children watched from the second row. There were thorns galore. But from the vantage point of a few years, I see how God used all of them to show me his power and my weakness. In ministry as in all things, all glory belongs to him alone.

### **Grueling, Glorious Calling**

Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra, senior writer for The Gospel Coalition, reported that pastor suicides climbed 24 percent between 1999 and 2014.<sup>12</sup> This trend serves as further confirmation that the difficulties that accompany pastoral ministry only increase over time. It was anything but easy for the apostle Paul, and it is anything but easy for today's pastor. Atop your job description as a pastor is suffering. And if you serve a local body in this capacity for more than three weeks, it will become part of your résumé.

The apostle Paul's ministry, particularly as he outlined it in 2 Corinthians, is inspired proof that the pastorate is, in the words of Paul David Tripp, a dangerous, grueling calling. Dangerous, yes, grueling, sure, but glorious as well for the work it accomplishes both in and through God's ministers. The same apostle that wrote 2 Corinthians also penned, under the Spirit's inspiration, Romans 5:3–5: "We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame."