

7 QUESTIONS FOR DEEPER BIBLE UNDERSTANDING

1 CORINTHIANS 4:9

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9 For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men. *1 Corinthians 4:9 ESV*

1. WHAT DID IT MEAN TO THE ORIGINAL READERS?

If you start with today you're twenty centuries too late.

In this verse Paul is giving a glimpse of his life from a divine perspective, seeing himself and his station in life from God's point of view. He isn't complaining about his suffering or hardships. Rather this is Paul calmly accepting the role that God has assigned him to play. The whole verse brings forth a very familiar Roman image of a conquering army (such as Julius Caesar's) coming back into Rome from a foreign conquest. In their return parade, the soldiers would march through the city, with the loot behind them. At the end of the procession would be the captured enemy combatants, who would most likely be sold into slavery or killed in the celebratory Coliseum games. Those at the end of the procession would be mocked, ridiculed, spat upon and abused before their ultimate fate.

That's how Paul sees his role in the grand scheme of things, as being at the end of the procession, subject to the scorn and ridicule not of a conquering people but to the spiritual world and spiritual forces of evil at war with God. The word "spectacle" is from the Greek word *theatros*, where we get "theater" from. It paints a picture not just of a private suffering that he is enduring, but a public shaming and hardship that is painfully visible to everyone around. In a society and culture where any form of hardship and suffering was automatically interpreted as a punishment from the gods for committed sins or offenses, the idea that such a public humiliation could have been orchestrated by God Himself and that Paul's suffering was not a sign of God's judgment but a necessary sacrifice to move the Kingdom forward was revolutionary thinking.

GREEK WORD OF THE WEEK

ἐπιθάνατος (epithanatos) is a Greek word rich with meaning. Translated here as "sentenced to death," this is the only occurrence of this word in the New Testament. This word is an allusion to the ancient Roman practice of exposing condemned criminals in the amphitheatre to fight with beasts or with one another as gladiators. The gladiators, on entering the arena, saluted the presiding officer with the words *Nos morituri salutamus*, "We who are to die greet you."

2. WHAT'S THE CONTEXT?

Scripture without context makes no sense.

The context for 1 Corinthians 4:9 is the wrapping up of a conversation that Paul started all the way back in chapter one about the leadership roles of Paul and Apollos in the church in Corinth. Chapter four is Paul's attempt to disabuse the Corinthian church of what they thought leadership was. True Christian apostleship was not a life of power and prestige but a life of sacrifice and humiliation, which is why Paul finishes his self-description in verse 13 with the terms "scum" and "refuse".

3. WHAT TIMELESS TRUTHS ARE THERE?

Since the Word doesn't change it still matters today.

- Christian leadership (apostleship) is a call to sacrifice, humiliation and pain. Comfort is waiting for us on the other side (heaven), but we must walk through many travails to enter the Kingdom of Heaven (Acts 14:22).
- God's love for us and blessings upon us are not antithetical to difficult circumstances and even pain and suffering that we might walk through in this life.
- Our entire lives are a spectacle (theater), visible not just to other humans but to all heavenly beings as well.

4. WHERE ELSE IN SCRIPTURE DOES IT SAY THIS? *The best interpreter of Scripture is Scripture.*

32 But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, 33 sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. *Hebrews 10:32-33 ESV*

36 As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." *Romans 8:36 ESV*

5. HOW DOES IT APPLY TODAY? *Information without application becomes stagnation.*

- The "prosperity gospel" has no place in orthodox Christian theology. The idea that following Jesus would automatically result in material blessings, physical health and a life of comfort would have been laughably alien to the Apostle Paul.
- To move the Kingdom forward, Christians must be willing to sacrifice, to take up their cross daily, and follow Jesus.
- Impacting our world for Jesus requires a level of sacrifice that many Christians are unwilling to make.

6. HOW SHOULD THIS CHANGE THE WAY I LIVE IN COMMUNITY? *The Bible comes alive in me when I live it in community.*

- Discuss some of the most difficult times you have walked through as a believer. Did you serenely accept your role as Paul did or did you react a different way towards God?
- The undercurrent of Paul's acceptance is that pain is necessary to move the Kingdom forward. Looking back at your difficult circumstances, can you see ways in which the Kingdom was advanced through your suffering?

7. HOW CAN MY LIFE GET BETTER BECAUSE OF THESE VERSES? *If I trust God and step in faith, what kind of life will God create?*

When we think of the phrase "how can my life get better," our minds immediately imagine a life devoid of pain and suffering and filled with pleasure and leisure. But with the deep truth revealed in this verse, we see a different perspective. Since sacrifice is foundational to the Christian life, the end we should seek for isn't necessarily a cessation of pain and suffering, but the perspective, peace and grace needed to walk through the suffering we all walk through in this life. Looking at what Paul sacrificed for the advancement of the Kingdom and how serenely he endured it, we should strive for the same peace, the same serenity, the same acceptance of our role in God's greater plan. That is what Paul himself experienced when he described "a peace which surpasses all understanding" (Philippians 4:7).