



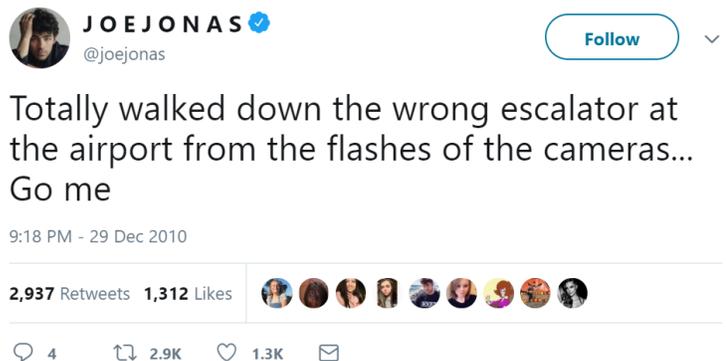
1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:1-13

I learned a new word this week. Humblebragging—make an ostensibly modest or self-deprecating statement with the actual intention of drawing attention to something of which one is proud.

Here's an example. Another woman complained about getting pulled over by the cops just because she was driving a Lamborghini.

Humblebragging's second cousin is the #Blessed statement that tends to be very popular on social media. Now if you have ever used it, don't get all bent out of shape by what I am saying. I know it's possible to be completely sincere when you're on social media and you're talking about being blessed. But we also know that it can be one of the most annoying things you will see. Even the secular media has recognized this for years. This non-Christian gets it half right.

I can't possibly see why anyone would want to dedicate their accomplishments to the "blessings" of a god. If you've earned it, you deserve the credit. God did not get you that job, you did. Or maybe your well-connected uncle did—point is, real people are involved. You also have to consider the person who works just as hard and doesn't get the job—if you're blessed, is he or she cursed?¹



I'm pretty sure Paul would not use #Blessed if he lived in our day but he certainly sounds grateful at the end of chapter two.

¹⁷ But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person not in heart, we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face, ¹⁸ because we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, again and again—but Satan hindered us. ¹⁹ For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? ²⁰ For you are our glory and joy.

As we saw last week, Paul and his ministry companions were truly “affectionately desirous” of the church in Thessalonica. He loved them dearly. They were his crown of boasting. But there were two things that could have stolen their joy—Satan and suffering. These are joy thieves and faith killers.

Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone, ² and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith, ³ that no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this. ⁴ For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction, just as it has come to pass, and just as you know. ⁵ For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain.

⁶ But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us, as we long to see you—⁷ for this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith. ⁸ For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord. ⁹ For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God, ¹⁰ as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith?

¹¹ Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, ¹² and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, ¹³ so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

Satan

Satan is mentioned twice in this passage in 2:18 and 3:5. Satan only appears 14 times in the entire Old Testament and eleven of those are in the book of Job. This makes sense since the heavenlies are peeled back and we see this amazing interaction between the Lord and Satan. That makes sense but it's crazy to think that Satan only appears three more times in the Old Testament.

He is called Satan, but we need to understand what the word means. The word Satan is more of a description than it is a name. The Hebrew word Satan means adversary. And he certainly is that. In Greek, the word is Satanas. This word does not mean anything. It is a transliteration of the Hebrew word. In other words, they took the Hebrew letters and changed them to Greek letters.

Paul has 2 concerns related to Satan's activity. First, that ministry could be hindered.

18 because we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, again and again—but Satan hindered us. I would love to ask Paul how he knew it was Satan hindering him. You might recall this map from the



first week in this series. Paul; was headed due west but the Holy Spirit prevented him, so he went north. But once he got so far north, the Holy Spirit stopped him again so he started going west again. This was a beautiful and very specific leading by the Holy Spirit. Somehow he knew that these times it was the Holy Spirit

hindering him but in chapter two he knew it was Satan hindering him.

Regardless, the point is well taken. Satan wants hinder all ministry. When you think about it, often Satan's job is pretty easy. There are countless things in our own lives which hinder ministry. Sin, selfishness, distractions, fear, a lack of faith, busyness, apathy. I think Satan must sit around and watch us and say "Thank you. Thank you for doing my job for me. You're making it very easy for me." Satan is an evil enemy bent on destruction, no question, but many believers give him too much power and too much emphasis. I believe his chief tactic is to use our own sin to trap us. It's like we fell in a hole that we dug for ourselves. Then once we are at the bottom of that hole, he tries to keep us there. I think that's a lot of the hindrance to ministry that happens in our lives and in our churches.

We see this in 3:5 as well.

5 For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain.

Here Satan is called the tempter. Paul was glad to receive the report from Timothy that their faith had stood firm and that the tempter had not been successful. By the way, the church in Thessalonica is one of the few churches who are not chastised by Paul. He only has positive things to say about them. They were still a young church so problems certainly crept in later but he was delighted to learn that the tempter had not succeeded in tempting them. But the question here is tempting them in what area? The context of the preceding two verses dealt with suffering so we can assume the temptation had to do with suffering.

The topic of suffering permeates this letter, especially in the first three chapters. Here are some of the words he used.

Affliction
Suffered
Shamefully treated
Much conflict

Labor and toil
Suffered the same things
Hindering us from speaking
Satan hindered us
Our distress and affliction

Any sort of suffering or hardship immediately raises the question, am I blessed? That's why I used the photo I did on the powerpoint slide. If your car breaks down, can you still be #Blessed? It's easy to feel blessed when you're on vacation at the beach and your children are all well groomed and perfectly behaving you. But are we still blessed when we have affliction and conflict and are shamefully treated? Or, as the atheist asked before, are we cursed? The topic of suffering is one that every believer needs to keep revisiting. If you do not have a good theology of suffering your walk with the Lord can suffer greatly. Hardship is inescapable, but it doesn't have to ruin your faith in the process.

Paul said something quite shocking here. He said that suffering is "destined." Now this is a little different than 2 Timothy 3:12 where Paul wrote, "all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." That's a promise of persecution and it's based on our behavior. If I don't follow Christ, it is impossible to be persecuted for my faith. So if you're looking to avoid suffering, there's one way to do it—though I would not recommend it. But here we are told that suffering is destined. I don't think it necessarily means that God knows every last bit of suffering you will endure—though that is certainly true. I think it just means that it is a certainty. It will happen because we live in a fallen world and because we are fallen creatures. Sin has touched every last cell and atom in creation. So even if we did not sin against one another, we would still suffer and die. It is our destiny.

Now we should be thankful that we live when and where we do. There have already been countless forms of technology to reduce our suffering and heal our bodies. Just this week I learned of an amazing breakthrough. It has special interest to me since I already have arthritis in my hands, so I hold out a wee bit of hope for something like this to benefit all of us.

For many years scientists have known that an accumulation of senescent cells in the body is linked to aging symptoms such as frailty and arthritis, as well as diseases such as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's.

We know there are at least 20 serious conditions that senescent cells are implicated in. We're starting with the most serious, but then we hope to move on to the rest. The same approach should work in multiple diseases.

The study showed that the drug combination began clearing out the cells within just 30 minutes and within 24 hours all senescent cells were gone. The drug starts working quickly and we would ideally like to be able to give it just once a month.²

But despite what medical technology may or not deliver for us, this fallen world will cause us to suffer. But Paul's larger concern was for the believer, that *no one be moved by these afflictions*. That is an important statement. Also, in verse eight Paul was concerned that they stand fast in the

Lord. So putting those two ideas together, you can either stand fast or else be moved off of your bearing and walk with the Lord.

On this past Thursday I was at an EFCA ministerial gathering in Sparta. We were talking about ministry or theological challenges that we have been facing. One of the pastors raised the topic of Open Theism. One of the attractions of Open Theism is that it claims to alleviate suffering. For example, the Open Theist claims that God did not know that you would suffer—whatever small or large trial that you face or will face. He didn't know it was going to happen so he cannot be blamed for it. Therefore, you can't be mad at God. I hope you see the problem with this belief. Not only is the premise completely wrong, but if God did not know this was going to happen to you, how is he going to be able to help you get through it. Moreover, it means that all suffering is random and has no purpose.

Interestingly, Paul did not even try to explain the purpose of suffering. He was merely concerned with making sure these young believers were able to stand fast through their suffering. The classic, one verse answer is Romans 8:28. "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." I've said this before, but it bears repeating. Please don't throw around this verse lightly. In other words, if someone tells you about their diagnosis of cancer, don't drop Romans 8:28 on them immediately. This is the theological response to their suffering, but it is not the pastoral response. Compassion first, theology second. Always.

But you will find that mature believers cling to Romans 8:28 (as well as the countless other passages that explain suffering and bring comfort for the believer. The most recent example I know is from Becky Smith. As Rod said last week, the Smiths were founding members of Grace Church. Becky's husband Stacy, was the assistant DA in Vernon County for many years and was just elected as the judge in Juneau County last year. They just moved into a new home with lots of acreage a few months back. Life was humming along wonderfully until just before Vjristmas when she had a seizure. After surgery to remove tumors in her brain, she posted this update ob facebook on January 3 "I have a I have a grade 4 astrocytoma that will require radiation and chemo. I am feeling at peace. God has a plan and I am OK with that." Does that sound like Becky is standing fast to you? Doe sit sound like she believes that all things will work together for good? She is obviously holding fast to Jesus.

Karen I saw this in a most profound way when we visited an old friend last month at St Mary's hospital in Madison. Dwight replaced me as associate pastor at our old church in Prairie du Sac. As it is, he has had a difficult life since he has been in a wheelchair since he was 16. There are all kinds of health issues associated with lifetime in a wheelchair. Dwight retired last March and then was diagnosed with liver cancer last Fall. After surgery he was told that he was cancer free but then two months later he was told it returned with a vengeance. So when we stopped by the hospital, we were fully expecting that this would be the last time we would see Dwight alive.

While we were still in the car, we thought for a moment how we could encourage Dwight. We assumed he would need some encouragement in the midst of this hard news. Do you want to know the first thing Dwight said to me? He told me that he was looking forward to the future. I guarantee he did not mean he was looking forward to another few months of suffering, He was

looking way beyond that. He was looking forward to Jesus and eternity. These were no empty words. He meant it from the depths of his soul. One of our favorite topics over the years was books so later on he told me he would go and get the library ready for me. Wow. I was an absolute mess when we prayed before we left. Just bawling, unable to talk at times. This is faith and suffering comingled in something extraordinary. I cannot explain to you how we felt as we walked through the hospital after that. It was profound. Yes, suffering and even death is our destiny but all of it is merely the first steps of eternity.

Rich Maurer
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¹ <https://thehumanist.com/commentary/are-you-blessed-or-just-bragging>

² <https://www.msn.com/en-gb/news/techandscience/drug-to-clear-zombie-cells-from-body-could-be-first-anti-ageing-treatment-after-%E2%80%98impressive%E2%80%99-human-trial/ar-BBRZpiV>