



Associated Canadian  
Theological Schools of  
Trinity Western University

## NORTHWEST BAPTIST SEMINARY

### *Thesis Approval*

This thesis, entitled

### **Grace in Affliction: Patterns in Pauline Thought on the Suffering of the Righteous**

written by

**Craig William Douglas**

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

**Master of Theological Studies**

has been approved by the undersigned examiners appointed by

**Northwest Baptist Seminary**

---

Ken Radant, Advisor

---

Phil Zylla, Examiner

---

Tony Cummins, Examiner

**Date: March 7, 2005**

*Approval does not necessarily imply endorsement of the conclusions of the thesis.*

ASSOCIATED CANADIAN THEOLOGICAL SCHOOL

GRACE IN AFFLICTION:  
PATTERNS IN PAULINE THOUGHT ON  
THE SUFFERING OF THE RIGHTEOUS

SUBMITTED TO NORTHWEST BAPTIST SEMINARY  
FOR FULFILLMENT OF A MASTERS OF  
THEOLOGICAL STUDIES DEGREE

BY  
CRAIG DOUGLAS

MARCH 2005

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ..... v

ABSTRACT ..... vi

Chapter

1. INTRODUCTORY MATTERS ..... 1

    Research Problem ..... 1

    Question & Hypothesis ..... 6

    Sources, Terminology, and Scope ..... 9

2. PAUL’S THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON SUFFERING ..... 15

    Paul’s “Dual” Understanding of Suffering ..... 16

    Paul’s Missionary Priority ..... 17

    Paul’s Centrality of the Cross ..... 19

    Paul’s Use of Suffering Language ..... 20

    Paul’s Suffering Terminology ..... 22

3. SIN: THE ROOT OF SUFFERING ..... 30

    All People Sin and Deserve to Suffer ..... 30

    Much Suffering is Attributable to a Fallen World ..... 34

    Suffering is Both Directly and Indirectly Connected to Sin ..... 36

    The Righteous Must Expect to Suffer for Now ..... 41

    Summary ..... 43

4. SUFFERING AS A BENEFIT TO THE CHRISTIAN ..... 45

    The Benefit of Sanctification ..... 47

    The Benefit of Identification with Christ ..... 56

    The Benefit of the Hope of Reward ..... 62

Summary .....	66
5. SUFFERING AS A BENEFIT TO THE CHURCH .....	68
The Benefits of Unity and Encouragement .....	69
The Benefit of Example .....	76
The Benefit of Edification .....	82
Summary .....	85
6. SUFFERING AS A BENEFIT TO CHRIST .....	87
The Benefit to the Gospel of Christ .....	89
The Benefit to the Service to Christ .....	96
The Benefit to the Glory of Christ .....	102
Summary .....	107
7. CONCLUSIONS .....	108
Summary of Paul's Understanding of Suffering .....	108
Implications for Ministry .....	113
Questions for Continued Study .....	125
Final Considerations .....	128
Appendix	
1. PRIMARY SUFFERING TERMS, LOCATIONS, AND FREQUENCY .....	131
2. GENERAL SUFFERING TERMS, MEANINGS, AND OCCURENCES .....	133
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	138
PERSONAL VITA .....	145

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

What a journey it has been to complete this thesis! What a joy it is to be done at last and to be able to finally pass this on to others who have cheered me on and encouraged me to keep going when things got difficult.

Of all the people I have to thank, there is no one who has been involved in this thesis and sacrificed more to see its completion than my wife, my very best friend, Leanne. Thank you Leanne for supporting our family by working, for putting up with deadlines and pressures, for all of your editorial work, and for even quitting your job to look after the kids for the last few months. You are an amazing woman, and the degree that I will be receiving should have your name on it beside mine. Thank you Benjamin and Lorelle, for putting up with a Dad at school, for all of your love, and for the joy you constantly bring me.

I want to thank my parents, Leanne's parents, the Stewarts, and others who constantly prayed for us during this time and encouraged me to keep going, to complete what I started.

Thank you Dr. Radant for being my advisor, for your time, patience, and tremendous insights along the way. Thank you Dr. Zylla, for getting me started on the journey of a "theology of suffering" and for your role and help as my second reader. Thank you also, Dr. Cummins, for stepping in as my external reader, and for all of your thoughts and comments.

Most of all, I thank my Heavenly Father for giving us His Word to guide us, to shape us, to teach us, and to speak to us in our times of need. Thank you for the peace you have given me in the difficult times, for your love and patience with me.

## ABSTRACT

Misery and suffering abound in this world of ours, and it is natural for most people to wonder why. When it comes to a Christian theology, the question intensifies: “How can we believe in a God that is good and sovereign when there is so much affliction in this world? Either He doesn’t care, or He is incapable of doing anything about it!”

Many theologians have sought to answer these kind of questions in theology and philosophy in various ways. One good approach is through biblical exegesis of a whole or part of the Bible. Paul had a unique perspective on suffering, as one who had suffered greatly in many ways, was a missionary among churches that were afflicted, and had a New Testament point of view of Christ’s sufferings and victory.

The following study takes a biblical-theological approach to Paul and observes that he reconciles suffering with God’s sovereignty and goodness in two primary ways: by making it clear that suffering is caused, at its root, by sin, and by regularly writing about the *benefits* experienced through and because of suffering. As Paul’s epistles are considered, several patterns of these benefits emerge, which may be categorized as benefits for the one who is suffering, benefits for the community of the one suffering, and benefits for the Lord of the one suffering.

The thesis concludes with some significant insights gained from studying these patterns, implications of these patterns for Christian ministry, and some thoughts for further study.

CHAPTER 1  
INTRODUCTORY MATTERS

Pain and suffering abound in this world of ours. Everywhere we look, if we have the eyes to notice and the ears to hear, people are crying out in anguish and despair. Our newspapers report daily about wars, disasters, tragedies, and injustices around our globe. Even in our Western society, affluent as it is, few families can avoid times of immense distress due to the affliction of loved ones. Suffering is certainly one of the most universal of all human experiences.

Research Problem

“Why do we suffer? What have we done to deserve this? What is the meaning of it?” The questions are many, and the answers seem to elude us. It is often supposed that suffering is, or should be, a consequence for wrong-living, yet our experience suggests that “evil” people suffer no more than the “good,” and in some cases less. Thus we read the frequent and familiar cry of the righteous in the Bible: “Why do the wicked prosper? Why do the righteous perish? Vindicate me, O Lord!”

When one studies the biblical literature, the “problem of evil and suffering” becomes even more acute, for God is constantly described as good, loving, and all-powerful. C.S. Lewis stated the problem as follows: “If God were good, He would wish to make His creatures perfectly happy, and if God were almighty, He would be able to do as He wished.

But the creatures are not happy. Therefore God either lacks goodness, or power, or both.’ This is the problem of pain in its simplest form.”<sup>1</sup>

There have been countless attempts to resolve this “problem” from both non-biblical and biblical perspectives. Deism, for example, denies that God is involved in this world. He may be good and powerful, but He is not immanent, so people are on their own. Pantheistic religions, such as Hinduism and New Age, see god and the universe as “one,” so there is no transcendent Being to help the human race. Suffering is seen as only an imperfection on the way to realizing our “one-ness” with the greater Reality.

In the realm of philosophy and apologetics, the word for attempting to show that God is not responsible for evil is “theodicy.”<sup>2</sup> A popular form of this is called the “free will defense,” which argues that God is not to blame for evil or suffering because He has given human beings the freedom and ability to choose their actions.<sup>3</sup> All suffering, therefore, results from wrong choices. The validity of this defense is highly debated for numerous reasons,<sup>4</sup> but it remains a popular philosophical answer to suffering.

---

<sup>1</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, HarperCollins ed. (n.p.: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 16. Based on my later definition that suffering does not necessarily include physical pain, I generally refer to this argument as the “problem of *suffering*” to be consistent throughout this study.

<sup>2</sup> Henri Blocher has provided an exhaustive survey and evaluation of the traditional, historical theodicies of the church. See his four articles: “Christian Thought and the Problem of Evil,” parts I, II, III, and IV, *Churchman* 99, no. 1 (1985): 6-24, no. 2 (1985): 101-130, no. 3 (1985): 197-215, and no. 4 (1985): 293-316.

<sup>3</sup> For a simple summary of the “free will defense” position, see Gregory Koukl, “Sixty Second Theodicy: How to Respond to the Problem of Evil, Neatly and Quickly;” available from [http://www.str.org/cgi-bin/print.pl/commentary\\_required=commentaries\\_apologetics\\_evil\\_sixtysec.htm](http://www.str.org/cgi-bin/print.pl/commentary_required=commentaries_apologetics_evil_sixtysec.htm); Internet; accessed 16 March 2004.

<sup>4</sup> This includes the arguments that people are *not* truly free to choose, that God could have made the world differently (i.e. so that suffering did not exist), or that people could have been made to always choose the good.



The question of God's passibility, or ability to suffer, has gained considerable prominence in recent years. Many modern theologians look toward a "suffering" or "vulnerable" God as a solution to human suffering, for if He is actively involved in and with our afflictions, if He demonstrates His solidarity with humanity by sharing our sorrows, He is not to be blamed. The "traditional" view, as suggested in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, that God has "no passive properties" and is "unchangeable,"<sup>5</sup> is being challenged by numerous Christian theologians of all denominational persuasions,<sup>6</sup> though others, such as Thomas Weinandy, are active in defending the position of a non-suffering God.<sup>7</sup>

Some theologians, such as Harold Kushner, have "solved" the problem by denying God's omnipotence.<sup>8</sup> God is seen as *incapable* of keeping people from suffering because either He is not all-powerful or He has chosen to limit His power. Kushner writes,

---

<sup>5</sup> Committee on Christian Education, *The Westminster Confession of Faith: With a Parallel Modern English Study Version* (Norcross, GA: Great Commission Publications, 1993), 13.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Weinandy gives an overview of these developments as follows: "From the dawn of the Patristic period Christian theology has held as axiomatic that God is impassible, that is, he does not undergo emotional changes of state, and so God does not suffer. Toward the end of the 19th century a sea of change began to occur within Christian theology such that at present many, if not most, Christian theologians hold as axiomatic that God is passible, that he does undergo emotional changes of state, and so does suffer. Historically this change was inaugurated by such English theologians as Andrew M. Fairbairn and Bertrand R. Brasnett. Within contemporary Protestant theology some of the better known theologians who espouse the passibility of God are Karl Barth, Richard Bauckham, John Cone, Paul Fiddes, Robert Jenson, Eberhard Jüngel, Kazoh Kitamori, Jung Young Lee, John Macquarrie, Jürgen Moltmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Richard Swinburne, Alan Torrance, Thomas F. Torrance, Keith Ward, and Nicholas Wolterstorff. Among Catholic theologians. . . . Raniero Cantalamessa, Jean Galot, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Roger Haight, Elizabeth Johnson, Hans Küng, Marcel Sarot and John Sobrino. Of course one must add . . . Process Theologians who, following the lead of Albert North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne, hold, by the very character of their philosophical position, that God is by nature passible and suffers." Thomas G. Weinandy, "Does God Suffer?" available from <http://www.arisdisputandi.org/publish/articles/000023/index.html>; Internet; accessed 14 February 2005.

<sup>7</sup> See Thomas G. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000). Weinandy strives to refute what he considers the "often erroneous arguments and assumptions that support the notion of a suffering God" and "offer a positive view of God and of his relationship to humankind, with its history of grief" which he believes to be "more biblically authentic, more historically accurate, more theologically persuasive, and so more emotionally gratifying." *Ibid.*, viii.

<sup>8</sup> The movement of "Open Theism" takes a similar road. See for example, Clark Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001).

I believe in God. But I do not believe the same things that I believed about Him years ago, when I was growing up or when I was a theological student. I recognize His limitations. He is limited in what He can do by laws of nature and by the evolution of human nature and human moral freedom. I no longer hold God responsible for illnesses, accidents, and natural disasters, because I realize that I gain little and I lose so much when I blame God for those things. I can worship a God who hates suffering but cannot eliminate it, more easily than I can worship a God who chooses to make children suffer and die, for whatever exalted reason.”<sup>9</sup>

On a more popular level, some Christians have attempted to explain suffering by expressing the value it has for the *believer*, especially in terms of discipline, sanctification, and unity with other believers.<sup>10</sup> Biblical “proof-texts” or simple logic are often used to support such claims. In *The Problem of Pain*, C.S. Lewis gives three primary reasons for pain, all of which focus on the personal benefits of suffering: first, pain “shatters the illusion that all is well”;<sup>11</sup> second, pain “shatters the creature’s false self-sufficiency”;<sup>12</sup> and third, pain is required for the “full acting out of the self’s surrender to God.”<sup>13</sup> He also suggests that tribulation may be a “necessary element in redemption.”<sup>14</sup>

Some theologians take a more biblical-exegetical approach. Donald Carson suggests, “Many (though certainly not all) of our difficulties with the problem of suffering arise from the fact that we ignore [the] biblical framework.”<sup>15</sup> In his book on suffering, *How Long O*

---

<sup>9</sup> Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Avon Books, 1983), 134.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Kurt De Haan, *Why Would a Good God Allow Suffering?* (Grand Rapids, MI: RBC Ministries, 1999). This small booklet, aimed at the “average” Christian, suggests that God allows suffering to *alert, direct, shape, and unite* believers.

<sup>11</sup> Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 94.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>15</sup> D. A. Carson, *How Long O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books; Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1990), 39.

*Lord?*, he concentrates on developing a biblical theology of suffering, and cites numerous passages from fifty-three of the Bible's sixty-six books.<sup>16</sup> Similarly in his Old Testament study, *The Suffering of God*, Terence Fretheim is said to stay "free of every ideological inclination and simply let us see what is in the text."<sup>17</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez has tackled suffering by using Job as his primary source.<sup>18</sup> These types of studies have wide, interdenominational appeal, perhaps because they tend to cause people to go to the text of the Bible, where they may already be accustomed to finding comfort and understanding.

With so many possible approaches to the problems of pain and suffering, how does one choose a direction? Some individuals and Christian communities will appreciate the existentialism of Moltmann.<sup>19</sup> Others will find agreement with Placher's narrative approach.<sup>20</sup> Still others will find Soelle's liberation/feminist approach<sup>21</sup> helpful. Others, however, will find that these approaches do not resonate with them personally, that the philosophical terms and categories are unfamiliar and their connection to the Bible are less self-evident. For the sake of those who respond to a more "exegetical" approach, for those

---

<sup>16</sup> Carson is a good example of a world-class theologian who has not stuck to traditional categories of theology, but has been willing to be both Biblical and interdisciplinary in his approach.

<sup>17</sup> Walter Brueggemann, foreword to *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective*, by Terence E. Fretheim (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), xiii.

<sup>18</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, *On Job: God-talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987).

<sup>19</sup> Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

<sup>20</sup> William C. Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God: Christ, Theology, and Scripture* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994).

<sup>21</sup> Dorothee Soelle, *Suffering*, First Paperback ed., trans. Everett R. Kalin (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

who are culturally and spiritually more connected to biblical phrasing and imagery, this thesis takes a biblical-theological approach, primarily looking at Paul and his writings.

### Question & Hypothesis

Paul experienced regular and sustained suffering like no one else in the Biblical narratives. Others, such as Job and Jeremiah, also suffered greatly, but no one in the Bible is described as receiving more imprisonments, scourgings, beatings, and stonings as is Paul. No one is shown to have suffered more for the sake of the advancement of the gospel. No one is portrayed as being so afflicted for the sake of the Church and for His Lord. No one is seen to have endured the variety of mistreatments at the hands of his countrymen as Paul.

From the very outset of Paul's missionary work, he knew that he was going to have to suffer greatly, for God told Ananias that He would show Paul "how much he must suffer" for the sake of His name (Acts 9:16).<sup>22</sup> Not only did he have his own suffering to contend with, such as his "thorn in the flesh" (2 Cor. 12:7), but he also felt immense pressure and concern because the churches he had helped to establish were undergoing trials (2 Cor. 11:28-29).

It is therefore not surprising that Paul has a lot to say concerning suffering in his epistles to the churches. This provides a wealth of theological data on suffering. While there are significant quantities of material dealing with suffering in several other corpora in Scripture (such as Psalms, Job, and Peter), the Pauline corpus also contains a key (and different) perspective. Paul, having studied the Law and the Prophets from infancy, was familiar with the Old Testament point of view and yet was able to look at suffering with the

---

<sup>22</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all scripture quotations were taken from the New American Standard Bible®, Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

added perspective of Christ's death and resurrection. What makes Paul's perspective even more fascinating is his developed understanding of God's absolute sovereignty and goodness (e.g. Romans 8:28-30; 11:33-36; 2 Cor. 9:9; Phil. 1:6; 1 Tim 4:4). In light of his personal suffering and the suffering he sees within the churches and among the believers, how is he able to reconcile this with his belief in a good and all-powerful God?

What this thesis specifically asks is this: How does Paul reconcile the suffering of the righteous with his emphasis on God's sovereignty and goodness? Or, in the modern context, how does Paul solve, to his satisfaction, the "problem of suffering"? Since Paul believes God to be ultimately in control of everything that happens in this world, and since he also believes God to be good, loving, and righteous, what explanations does he give for the obvious fact that believers, the "righteous," regularly suffer great hardships?

The answers to these questions are found in the fact that Paul was able to see both the utter "evilness" of suffering and the "good" that God is able bring out of it. He saw suffering occurring because of sinful choices, but he believed that God, in His goodness and sovereignty, is able to take suffering and make it into something good for those who belong to Him. Specifically, the hypothesis established through this study is as follows:

Paul reconciles the suffering of the righteous with God's sovereignty and goodness primarily and consistently in two ways. First, he demonstrates that the root cause of suffering is sin. Second, he demonstrates that God brings value to the suffering of the righteous by using it to benefit the one suffering, to benefit the community of the one suffering, and to benefit the Lord of the one suffering.

This represents an approach that recognizes Paul's "dual" understanding of suffering, which incorporates both the root causes of suffering and the way that God takes suffering and makes it into something good and profitable. The benefits of suffering are not *only* for the good of the Christian suffering, as many such as Lewis emphasize, but also for the good of

the larger Church body and for the good – and glory – of Christ. This study attempts to account for the majority of Paul’s statements on suffering without preconceived categories and thereby produce balanced and accurate insights.

A secondary question this thesis raises is a matter of *approach*. What is the value of doing a study on suffering that is highly exegetical in form and substance, both in its methodology and in its means of presenting conclusions? Are there benefits in an approach that stays close to the shape of the biblical narrative as it seeks answers to the problem of suffering in this world? As others, such as Fretheim, have demonstrated, this approach can be very valuable.

This study begins by very briefly looking at Paul’s basic theological perspective on suffering. This includes a short study of the “suffering” terminology employed by Paul. A chapter follows on Paul’s understanding of suffering as being caused, at its root, by sin. Following this, there is a chapter on each of the three categories of “benefits” of suffering that may be inductively drawn out of the patterns within Paul’s writings. These include: God’s use of suffering as a benefit to the one suffering (i.e. to the Christian), as a benefit to the community of the one suffering (i.e. to the Church), and as a benefit to the Lord of the one suffering (i.e. to Christ). It is in these areas that Paul seems to speak most consistently and clearly about the suffering of the righteous. This is followed by a final chapter that will incorporate some theological synthesis and conclusions.

### Sources, Terminology, and Scope

In order to proceed, some parameters must be set for this study. First, in regard to *sources* to be used, the primary materials will be the thirteen epistles that bear Paul's name,<sup>23</sup> plus statements in Acts that are either by him or directly about him. Considering Paul's regular emphasis on suffering in his epistles, it is surprising how little has been written on the subject of Paul's understanding of suffering.<sup>24</sup> Schreiner writes,

The prominence of [the topic of suffering] in Paul . . . says something about typical Pauline theologies, for seldom do they contain an extended discussion of suffering. Such an omission suggests that certain systematic categories, which interest contemporary authors, may cause them to overlook a theme that permeates his letters. In a biblical-theology approach, suffering must be examined since it is a topic that Paul discusses at some length and it is vital to the Pauline mission.<sup>25</sup>

One of the dangers in a study such as this is to base one's conclusions more upon preconceived categories of God's purposes in suffering than upon the strength, both

---

<sup>23</sup> While Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon are generally undisputed as genuinely Pauline, there remains much debate over the authorship of Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus, which are considered by some to be deuteropauline or pseudonymous. See Bruce N. Fisk, "Paul: Life and Letters," in *The Face of New Testament Studies: A Survey of Recent Research*, ed. Scot McKnight and Grant R. Osborne (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 283-284. I have seen no arguments that convince me that Paul *could not* have written this second group of books, nor is there evidence that early Christians believed they were not of Paul or even *could have been* written by someone else. D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 370. For the sake of this study, I am assuming that these thirteen letters are Pauline in content and reliability, whether or not they were all in fact written by him directly. Even if Paul did not directly write some of these letters, the Church has traditionally received these letters as inspired and useful, and they still contribute greatly to our understanding of the suffering of the righteous and how it can be reconciled with God's goodness and sovereignty.

<sup>24</sup> A case in point is John McRay's recent text, *Paul: His Life and Teaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003). Nowhere in his Contents or ten page Subject Index does he mention "suffering," "persecution," "affliction" or "martyrdom." He has one page each listed for "beatings" and "stoning of," and two pages for "whipping of" in a 479-page book. Paul's "thorn in the flesh" is mentioned in passing three times in the book (pp. 39, 99, 120), but it is never engaged regarding its value for him or his ministry. McRay's book is sadly representative of many, if not most, major Pauline studies, including the even more recent *The Gospel According to Paul* by Robin Griffith-Jones (n.p.: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004).

<sup>25</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; Leicester, England: Apollos, 2001), 89.

numerically and in terms of significance, of the texts themselves.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, the starting point of this study has been to devote extensive time to the study of the text and what Paul is actually saying. This has included a number of methods. One of these methods was simply to read the Pauline corpus several times, noting each passage that seemed to address suffering in its various forms. This produced numerous suffering “terms,” which, when studied, produced numerous additional synonymous terms. All of these terms were additionally searched within the corpus, revealing more passages to be considered. As each passage of the data was studied in context, some passages clearly did not speak to Paul’s understanding of suffering,<sup>27</sup> and the rest revealed patterns within Pauline thought that suggested categories. These categories were considered, tested, and adapted to discover where the majority of the relevant data would naturally fit. During this entire process, secondary literature<sup>28</sup> was used to further test categories, meanings of passages, and general direction of the study. All of this has produced both the hypothesis and the study at hand.

---

<sup>26</sup> For example, Barry D. Smith seems to do this very thing in his recent book, *Paul’s Seven Explanations of the Suffering of the Righteous* (New York: P. Lang, 2002). Smith provides many valuable insights, but in categorizing Paul’s understanding of suffering into seven explanations, he gives the impression that his categories are to be found equally in Paul, which they certainly are not. His seven categories tend to fall into typical explanations found in the Bible, but he seems to force Paul into saying more (and less) than he is saying at times. For example, his category of “The Suffering of the Righteous as Probationary” gives only two passages in Paul (Rom. 5:2-4 and 2 Thess. 1:5) with which to support this explanation, and Smith writes in both cases that these verses represent “probable” probationary explanations (139-141). Similarly, none of his seven categories touch upon a major theme of Paul’s writings on suffering, namely that the suffering of the righteous is often used to benefit fellow believers in numerous ways. Nor do the categories deal with suffering for the sake of Christ, which is also a significant theme in Paul.

<sup>27</sup> For example, some terms are only used to refer to suffering in certain contexts, such as *diōkō*, which can either mean “to pursue” (e.g. pursue righteousness, in Rom. 9:30) or “to persecute” (e.g. Paul persecuted the church, in 1 Cor. 15:9) In such cases, the context made it clear as to its meaning and significance for the study.

<sup>28</sup> Secondary source materials primarily include general Pauline theologies, major commentaries on his epistles, Greek lexicons, books and articles directly dealing with the subject of Paul and suffering, and more general books on the theological issue of suffering.



Obviously, a study of this size cannot provide significant exegesis of every passage in Paul which addresses suffering, so, while treating the text carefully, this study will look along the lines of *patterns* emerging from the Pauline corpus.<sup>29</sup> In other words, when Paul addresses suffering, as he frequently does, what explanations does he *normally* provide? Paul does not formally state anywhere: “These are *the* reasons the righteous suffer,” but he does regularly write to those who are undergoing trials, and he frequently writes about his own sufferings. These provide many clues as to his understanding of suffering (and in turn, his understanding of God). Some of the most significant passages within these patterns will be examined and considered more closely.

A second consideration is the basic *terminology* to be used. Suffering can be defined in a general sense as *any experience*, from the subjective perspective of the one suffering, *that is negative*.<sup>30</sup> A more precise definition of “suffering” comes from Eric Cassell, in the *Hastings Center Report*: “The distress brought about by the actual or perceived threat to the integrity or continued existence of the whole person.”<sup>31</sup> By suffering, then, this study refers to distress which *may or may not* include an element of physical pain, but which *always* includes an element of mental anguish. This could, for example, come from a loss of purpose

---

<sup>29</sup> Rather than trying to state that Paul gives a specific number of *reasons* for the suffering of the righteous, by “patterns” and “categories,” I am demonstrating that he uses various explanations that may be generally grouped in order to provide a more systematic understanding of the texts. By the end, these patterns will probably tell us much about God’s reasons for suffering, even if they do not give unequivocal answers. It will also be seen that many of the “typical” ways we tend to speak about suffering today do not reflect Paul’s treatment of suffering.

<sup>30</sup> Smith, *Paul’s Seven Explanations*, 4.

<sup>31</sup> E. Cassell, “Recognizing Suffering,” *Hastings Center Report* 21 (1991): 24-31; quoted in Ronald Russell, “Redemptive Suffering and Paul’s Thorn in the Flesh,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 39, no. 4 (Dec. 1996): 559-560.

or meaning in life.<sup>32</sup> Words such as “affliction,” “distress,” “anguish,” and “sorrow” will be used almost synonymously to “suffering” for the sake of variety, though often with different nuances. Paul himself, as will be discussed, uses many different Greek terms to describe the suffering that existed in his life and in the lives of the believers of his day.

Since this study is primarily looking at the suffering of the righteous, it is also important to define what is meant by the “righteous.” Since Paul is clear that no one is righteous on his or her own merit (e.g. Rom. 3:10, 20, 23) but only through faith in Jesus Christ (e.g. Rom. 3:22), another word for the righteous is simply “believers.” Since only God knows who the righteous truly are, all who *profess faith* are encapsulated in the terms “righteous,” “Christians,” and “believers,” for the sake of this study. As a group of New Testament believers, the righteous may corporately be referred to as “the Church.” This includes the recipients of Paul’s letters – those he has in mind as he is writing his epistles.

A third consideration is the *scope* of this project. Due to the size of the genres of both “suffering” literature and Pauline studies, there are definite limitations to what will be discussed in this study. First, the overall goal of this project is not to prove God’s *sovereignty* or His *goodness*. As Carson maintains, “Despite everything it says about the limitless reaches of God’s sovereignty, the Bible insists again and again on God’s unblemished goodness. God is *never* presented as an accomplice of evil, or as secretly malicious. . . .”<sup>33</sup> That Paul believes God to be sovereign and good is assumed in this study.

Since Paul does not rely upon a “free will defense,” nor use other typical modern philosophical defenses of God, sovereignty and goodness are likely less of an issue for Paul

---

<sup>32</sup> Russell, “Redemptive Suffering,” 560.

<sup>33</sup> Carson, *How Long O Lord?*, 205.

than for modern day scholars. Paul is convinced that God *is* somehow working through suffering. God is good – for what else could He be? – and there are numerous ways in which believers can see good coming from their suffering. If God is unable or unwilling to control events in some way, or is only “good” in a way completely foreign to humanity, the “problem of suffering” disappears. Yet Paul and the churches seem to genuinely puzzle over their afflictions. Therefore, this project primarily looks at the second side of the equation: if God *is* both sovereign and good, *then why do the righteous suffer?*

As a study in *Paul’s* reconciliation of suffering, the primary data must come from his writings. In order to keep this project focused, the more philosophical and existential studies in suffering will remain secondary, informing but not directing the study. Regarding the “suffering of God” debate, Paul presents a suffering Jesus, but not a suffering Father. I agree with Beker, who writes,

There is no Christomonism of the cross, no passion mysticism or patri-passionism in Paul. The issue of God’s suffering love versus his impassibility is not to be imported into Paul’s thought. The later emphasis in church history on God’s impassibility (*apatheia*) presupposes a Greek metaphysical scheme that has no connection with Paul’s conception of God’s future apocalyptic sovereignty over his creation. Paul confines the realms of suffering and death to this world and does not make them constituent aspects of God’s being. The glory of God as the destiny of creation is not contaminated by – or coordinated with – notions of the virtues of suffering, pain, or death. . . . It would be inappropriate to incorporate suffering into the being of God or to equate God’s compassion for the world with the finality of the cross of Christ as the “crucified God.”<sup>34</sup>

For those who may not be satisfied or comfortable with the shape and categories of some of the current philosophical and theological debates on suffering, an exegetical look at

---

<sup>34</sup> J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1980), 199-200. For more on the “suffering of God” debate, see especially Weinandy, *Does God Suffer*, Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God*, Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, and Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*.

Paul's theological perspective serves as an excellent starting point to understanding God's purposes in suffering. There are many advantages to this approach. First, it allows the reader to "hear the text" more directly by staying close to the biblical narrative without using preconceived categories that may have little to do with Paul's approach. Second, it takes into account not only Paul's most well-known passages, but the majority of the times he discusses suffering in its various forms. Third, the categories themselves speak to the reality of each type of human relationship – how we relate to ourselves, to others, and to God – and demonstrate how suffering affects each of these. Finally, it provides "ordinary" Christians a solid framework with which to evaluate the more philosophically processed approaches to the problem of suffering.

In the end, if the answers we discover and reveal do not satisfy, do not coincide with our perception of reality, we will remain at a loss to answer the difficult questions of suffering that haunt us. What have we done to deserve this grief? Why must the righteous suffer? A look at Paul's perspective is now in order.

## CHAPTER 2

### PAUL'S THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON SUFFERING

To many people in modern times, “Suffering has become the most dreaded and the most overwhelming form of evil.”<sup>35</sup> Whereas most people in the past were more concerned with the “moral evil” that came from the abuse of human freedom, today many people see moral evil as secondary to suffering. Suffering is often seen as the cause or reason for people committing morally evil acts.<sup>36</sup> In other words, people act “poorly” or in “anti-social” ways because they are *victims*, because they have themselves suffered. There is no responsibility for or acknowledgement of sin, only blame on the suffering each person has had to endure.

This “victim mentality” has also penetrated some Western churches, where little may be preached on sin, but numerous courses on recovery and therapy may be offered. In our often-shallow view of suffering, Christians tend to view it as either an evil to be destroyed or as a burden to be quietly endured. On one side, the “health and wealth” gospel teaches that suffering is *never* God’s will in a person’s life, so it must be removed at any cost. Anyone who continues to suffer lacks faith or has “sin issues.” On the other side, some believers have traditionally counseled those who suffer to endure it bravely and silently because “it is God’s will to test and teach you.” Assuming that it is God’s will, these will never lift a finger to

---

<sup>35</sup> Arthur C. McGill, “Human Suffering and the Passion of Christ,” in *The Meaning of Human Suffering*, ed. Flavian Dougherty (NY: Human Sciences Press, 1982), 165.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

alleviate pain or eliminate suffering.<sup>37</sup> Is it possible to find a middle ground between *avoiding* suffering and *embracing* it?

### Paul's "Dual" Understanding of Suffering

Paul consistently found the path between these errors. He had a "dual" understanding of suffering: it was an evil to be destroyed, yet it was also used by God for greater purposes. This can be illustrated – briefly, for now – by his "thorn in the flesh" (2 Cor. 12:7). He called this thorn a "messenger of Satan," yet he claimed that Christ's power was somehow "made perfect" in his resulting weakness. He fervently prayed for it to be removed, yet he eventually accepted it as God's will for his life and ministry. He was no masochist – he wanted the thorn removed – but he saw that God had a greater purpose for it, that his ministry was actually better *with* the thorn than *without* it! He somehow knew that God had a greater purpose for it, that God was bringing *benefit* from something that was in itself evil.

Is suffering God's will? How does one distinguish between what God first and foremost desires for people and what He takes and uses as part of His ultimate plan? For example, Paul makes it clear in 1 Thessalonians 4:1-7 that God's *will* (v. 3) and his *purpose* (v. 7) is that believers live pure lives. In spite of this, we know from experience that some do not. Similarly, Peter writes, "He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). God's "perfect" will seems to be that all people should repent, yet many do not. He allows people a degree of choice<sup>38</sup> in spite of what

---

<sup>37</sup> For example, segments in the Church even objected to anesthesia being introduced in the mid-1800s to reduce the pain of childbirth. Russell, "Redemptive Suffering," 562.

<sup>38</sup> How *much* choice has been debated for centuries and will not be discussed in this study. Paul does not resolve for his readers his beliefs that God is sovereign and that people are responsible, but he holds these ideas in tension (a trademark of Pauline theology). Similarly, Paul does not reflect on the currently popular

He would “want” for all people. Suffering, too, is not God’s perfect will for His creation, and it is clear that a certain amount of it occurs because God allows people the free will to make choices, some of which are harmful. Yet though suffering itself is evil,<sup>39</sup> God ultimately causes good to come out of it.

Paul would have been very aware of the Old Testament example of this concept in Joseph, who said to his brothers who had sold him as a slave, “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive” (Gen. 50:20). Did God intend evil for Joseph or did He *use* the evil that came from the choice the brothers made to accomplish His purposes? It is clear that the latter is being demonstrated. Paul understood that suffering, in all its many forms, is evil, yet he knew that God can – and does – use it for good.

### Paul’s Missionary Priority

It is important to note that Paul was at heart primarily a *missionary*, not a theologian.<sup>40</sup> His letters were written primarily out of pastoral concern, usually to churches he himself had established, to help them get through actual difficulties they were encountering and remain faithful. Gorman writes, “The purpose of Paul’s letters generally, and of the various kinds of narratives within them, is not to teach theology but to mold behavior, to affirm or – more often – to alter patterns of living, patterns of experience. The

---

concept of God’s “self-limitation,” and neither will this study. Because this study is framed with biblical categories, it’s focus will be very different than one framed by other more philosophical categories.

<sup>39</sup> In other words, “morally bad or harmful,” in and of itself. Millard J. Erickson, *The Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology*, rev. ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001), 61.

<sup>40</sup> J. Paul Sampley, “From Text to Thought World: The Route to Paul’s Ways,” in *Thessalonians, Philippians, Galatians, Philemon*, Pauline Theology 1, ed. Jouette M. Bassler (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 3.

purpose of his letters, in other words, is pastoral or spiritual before it is theological.”<sup>41</sup>

Roetzel calls Paul’s epistles “occasional documents written for specific, concrete situations.”<sup>42</sup>

Paul’s letters were part of his missionary work, which he wrote in order to encourage believers to stand strong in their young faith. Paul’s theological efforts were to support his missionary work.<sup>43</sup> As Sampley writes, “In Paul’s letters we have direct access to the communication of his thoughts as they intersect real life situations and only indirect access to the thought world from which his thoughts gain expression. Our reconstruction of what we might call a theology of Paul will always be a modern abstraction, a distillation that we gain from his thought world.”<sup>44</sup> It is a practical theology out of the situations he and his church found themselves in.<sup>45</sup>

Therefore one would not expect to find a systematic treatise by Paul on a subject such as suffering. However, since he and his churches were going through trials, one *would* expect to find numerous references to those trials, which is the case. Pobee writes, “Since theology emerges from the experience of a people, it would be a surprise if the experience of attack, indeed persecution, did not leave its mark and did not influence the documents of the

---

<sup>41</sup> Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul’s Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 4.

<sup>42</sup> Calvin J. Roetzel, *Paul* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), 176.

<sup>43</sup> Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God’s Glory in Christ*, 39, 61.

<sup>44</sup> Sampley, “From Text to Thought World,” 3.

<sup>45</sup> Even Romans, which is “thoroughly doctrinal,” is, “like every book in the NT . . . rooted in history,” according to Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 1. He writes, “It is not a systematic theology but a letter, written in specific circumstances with specific purposes.” Ibid.



Church.”<sup>46</sup> One would also expect that the churches Paul had founded would wonder why they had to suffer, especially considering the causal connection often made in the Jewish Scriptures between sin and suffering.<sup>47</sup> Paul frequently addresses this, though usually informally and in passing. Therefore, the “raw data” of Paul’s understanding of suffering exists in his letters. Sampley suggests that one very good way to bring coherency out of Paul’s writings is to study the patterns within his arguments,<sup>48</sup> and that is indeed the course of action for the majority of this project.

From the outset of his missionary work, Paul expected to suffer. He counted his life worth nothing to him, and his missionary goal remained to complete the task the Lord Jesus had given him – “to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God” (Acts 20:24).

#### Paul’s Centrality of the Cross

It would be difficult to study Paul for long without identifying the cross as central to his message and missionary work.<sup>49</sup> As Stott writes:

[Paul] found no anomaly in defining his gospel as “the message of the cross,” his ministry as “we preach Christ crucified,” baptism as initiation into his death and the Lord’s Supper as a proclamation of the Lord’s death. He boldly declared that, though the cross seemed either foolish or a “stumbling block” to the self-confident, it was in fact the very essence of God’s wisdom and power.<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup> J. S. Pobee, *Persecution and Martyrdom in the Theology of Paul*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series (Sheffield, U.K.: JSOT Press, 1985), 13.

<sup>47</sup> Smith, *Paul’s Seven Explanations*, 2.

<sup>48</sup> Sampley, “From Text to Thought World,” 11.

<sup>49</sup> Pobee, *Persecution and Martyrdom*, 47.

<sup>50</sup> John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 35-36.

To make the cross central is also to make suffering central, for what was the cross if not a symbol of death and suffering? Both the Romans and the Jews were horrified by the cross. Cicero considered it “a most cruel and disgusting punishment.” He said, “To bind a Roman citizen is a crime, to flog him is an abomination, to kill a Roman citizen is almost an act of murder: to crucify him – is What? There is no fitting word that can possibly describe so horrible a deed.”<sup>51</sup> The Jews considered anyone crucified to be under God’s curse, as taught in Deuteronomy 21:23, and were similarly horrified of the cross. Thus, the cross was “a stumbling block to Jews” – who could not imagine their Messiah crucified – and “foolishness to the Gentiles” (1 Cor. 1:23).<sup>52</sup> Yet to Paul, the cross was the way of Christ and therefore the way of all who would follow Him. This clearly included suffering.

#### Paul’s Use of Suffering Language

A large amount of what Paul writes about his own sufferings is placed in what have been called his “*peristasis* catalogues” or “catalogues of suffering” (1 Cor 4:9-13; 2 Cor 4:8-9; 6:3-10; 11:23-29; 12:10). According to Fitzgerald, such catalogues were frequently used in Graeco-Roman philosophy to legitimize the claims a person was making, to display his virtue, and to portray him as an ideal philosopher. This idea of a “suffering sage” showed a person to be a reliable guide for people who wanted to live virtuous lives.<sup>53</sup> “Since *peristasis* catalogues were a traditional means of demonstrating virtue, it was natural that he would employ them for this purpose. Furthermore, since the *peristasis* catalogue was an established

---

<sup>51</sup> Cicero, *Against Verres* 2.64.165, 2.66.170, quoted in Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 24.

<sup>52</sup> Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 24.

<sup>53</sup> John T. Fitzgerald, *Cracks in an Earthen Vessel: An Examination of the Catalogues of Hardships in the Corinthian Correspondence* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1988), 203.

device for distinguishing true philosophers from false ones, it provided him with a tool in his task of establishing himself as a true apostle and distancing himself from the superapostles.”<sup>54</sup> If Fitzgerald is correct, this goes a long way to explain the saturation of suffering language in the extant Corinthian correspondences, especially as they compare to the other epistles.

What is suffering if it is not a disturbance in, a breaking of, the *peace* that all people desire in their lives? “Peace” (*eirēnē*) is one of Paul’s favourite concepts. He connects it to salvation (Rom. 5:1) and consistently declares that it is “of God” and comes “from God” (e.g. Rom. 1:7; Phil. 4:9). Of the 91 times it is used in the New Testament, Paul uses it 54 times. It is the LXX translation of the Hebrew “shalom,” and it primarily means “wholeness.”<sup>55</sup> It is further linked with life (*zōē*) and contrasted with death (*thanatos*; Rom. 8:6), while in John 16:33, it is shown in direct antithesis with suffering (*thlipsis*).<sup>56</sup> In all thirteen epistles attributed to him, Paul begins with a greeting of “peace” combined with “grace” (*charis*). More than just a traditional greeting, it is his wish that that all aspects of their lives are whole. Peace is also an aspect of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22), and Paul wishes that the *Lord* of peace will continually grant *believers* peace in *every* circumstance (2 Thess. 3:16). He wishes them peace because these “circumstances” come in direct opposition to the wholeness of peace.<sup>57</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>55</sup> H. Beck and C. Brown, “εἰρήνη,” in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 2, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan; Exeter, U.K.: Paternoster Press, 1986), 780.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 780-781.

<sup>57</sup> Yet God also brings wholeness in spite of suffering, as will be seen in later chapters.

Words are often best understood by their opposites, and Paul's use of his suffering vocabulary can be seen consistently contrasted with this concept of peace, of "shalom." Suffering, in its various forms, is a sign of "wholeness" lost – or never attained – in this world. How can one be at peace when tormented, sick, grieving, or dying? The very presence of such concepts indicates that the creation has somehow fallen short of God's plan for peace and wholeness. Instead of wholeness and life, people are inundated with sin and death. This can also be seen clearly in the terminology Paul normally uses to describe the difficulties he and his churches regularly experienced.

### Paul's Suffering Terminology

According to Beker, the three most prominent terms in Paul's "vocabulary of suffering" are *thlipsis*, *pathema*, and *paschō*.<sup>58</sup> Although he is correct in identifying the importance of these words, as they do represent the majority of the times a word is translated "suffering," "affliction," or "persecution" in Paul's writings, there are several other terms that have similar overall significance in Paul's language of suffering. Below is a brief synopsis of the primary terms Paul uses.<sup>59</sup>

### Suffering, Persecution, and Torment

Some key words that are generally translated *suffering*, *persecution*, or *torment* include the words *paschō* (23 occurrences in Paul), *thlipsis* (31x) and *diōkō* (27x). The original meaning of *paschō* was little more than the idea of being affected by something,

---

<sup>58</sup> J. Christiaan Beker, "Suffering and Triumph in Paul's Letter to the Romans," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 7, no. 2 (Dec. 1985): 106. *Pathema*, however, is a cognate of *paschō* and should be treated along with it.

<sup>59</sup> A chart of these primary terms and their occurrences in Paul's epistles may be found in Appendix 1. Appendix 2 gives an exhaustive list of the terms used and considered in this study, and their meanings.

whether good or bad. By the time of the New Testament it was used infrequently in the good sense, and only when it was obvious from context that a good sense was meant.<sup>60</sup> Paul uses it exclusively to mean something that is affecting people in a negative way, something that is causing suffering or causing people to endure difficult circumstances. Several times Paul uses *paschō* to indicate that believers must share in one another's sufferings (e.g. 1 Cor. 12:26; 2 Cor. 1:6) as well as sharing in the suffering of Christ in some sense (e.g. 2 Cor. 1:5; Phil. 3:10). He also emphasizes that they are suffering for Christ and His kingdom (e.g. Phil. 1:29; 2 Thess. 1:5). Paul's sufferings, too, are for the sake of the Church (Col. 1:24).

The verb form of *thlipsis*, *thilibō*, means literally to “press, squeeze, or crush”<sup>61</sup> and both terms are always used by Paul in the figurative sense of oppressing or afflicting. The noun is usually translated “affliction,” “tribulation,” or “trouble.” Numerous times, Paul joins *thlipsis* with one or more positive terms such as “joy,” “comfort,” or “relief” (Rom. 5:3; 12:12; 2 Cor. 1:4-6; 7:4; 8:2; Col. 1:24; 1 Thess. 3:7; 2 Thess. 1:7), and there is a strong sense that *God is accomplishing something far greater* through the afflictions that believers are enduring (Rom. 5:3-5; 2 Cor. 1:6; 4:17; Col. 1:24; 2 Thess. 1:5-8). Another word, *stenochōria*, is closely connected to *thlipsis* and is used 7 times by Paul.

Paul uses *diōkō* and its cognates to mean “persecute” or “pursue.” It is used sometimes to simply indicate something was pursued, such as righteousness (Rom. 9:30; 1 Tim. 6:11), but it usually has the sense of an attack on a person or group. Paul persecuted the Church (1 Cor. 15:9; Gal. 1:13; 23; Phil. 3:6; 1 Tim. 1:13), now experienced persecution

---

<sup>60</sup> Walter Bauer et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 633.

<sup>61</sup> Reinier Schippers, “θλιψις,” in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 2, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan; Exeter, U.K.: Paternoster Press, 1986), 807.

himself (2 Cor. 4:9; 12:10; Gal. 5:11), and promised his churches that they likewise will suffer in this same way (2 Tim. 3:12).<sup>62</sup> Yet Paul assures believers that not even persecution can separate them from God's love (Rom. 8:35). Can it also be said that suffering actually draws one *closer* to the love of Christ? Are there other benefits of even the wholly negative experience of persecution?

### Grief and Burdens

Another category of words Paul uses to signify suffering is along the lines of those experiencing *grief* or *burdens*. The words Paul uses most frequently to denote these are *lypeō* and *kopos*. Paul uses *lypeō* 24 times, and it has the sense of causing someone sorrow or inflicting pain. Bauer defines it in terms of sadness, distress, and grief,<sup>63</sup> whereas Haar and Link indicate it “denotes physical pain and emotional suffering.”<sup>64</sup> As has been suggested, suffering often has both a physical and an emotional or psychological component. Paul uses *lypeō* primarily (17 out of 24 times) in 2 Corinthians, discussing the sorrow their disagreement had caused, yet he points immediately to the *benefit* of the sorrow they had endured, seeing that it had produced repentance in them (2 Cor. 7:9-10) and much more (v. 11). Paul also uses *klaiō* (5x), *stenazō* (4x), and *pentheō* (2x), all of which have the idea of “weeping” or “groaning,” and *anagkē* (10x), “distress.”

---

<sup>62</sup> Günther Ebel, “δύωκω,” in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 2, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan; Exeter, U.K.: Paternoster Press, 1986), 806.

<sup>63</sup> Bauer et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 481.

<sup>64</sup> Hermann Haarbeck and Hans-Goerg Link, “λυπέω,” in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 2, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan; Exeter, U.K.: Paternoster Press, 1986), 420.

Paul uses two primary words for “burden,” *kopos* (25x) and *baros* (10x). “*Kopos* means a striking, beating. . . . It also denotes in the tragic poets striking the breast in lamentation. It then came to denote the physical consequences of a stroke, weariness, depression. . . . Thus everything that leads to work, exertion, toil, pain and hardship can be called *kopos*.”<sup>65</sup> Outside of Paul, it is used only 11 times in the New Testament. Paul often connects *kopos* with hardship (2 Cor. 6:5; 11:23, 27; Gal. 6:17; 1 Thess. 2:9; 2 Thess. 3:8), and he uses it to describe his own manual labour (1 Cor. 4:12; 1 Thess. 2:9), which he sees as working for his Lord.<sup>66</sup> *Baros* is usually translated “burden,” and is used generally by Paul as a difficulty placed upon someone (2 Cor. 1:8; 5:4; 1 Tim. 5:16).

Other words Paul uses less frequently in a similar sense are: *ōdinō* (4x), which means to be in pain, as in giving birth (e.g. Gal. 4:19, 27), and *talaipōreō* (2x), which means to be distressed (e.g. Rom. 7:24 – “wretched man that I am!”). Here again, there is an inherent duality in Paul’s understanding of suffering. The hardship of toil and work often results in great accomplishments, as Paul saw in the *kopos* he endured for the churches. Likewise, the grueling agony of childbirth anticipates the joy of the child being born. Are there natural laws that God has put in place whereby some suffering, properly endured, brings greater joy?

### Weakness, Sickness, and Death

Paul frequently uses *astheneia* (43x) in his writings, meaning “weakness,” “sickness,” or “powerlessness.”<sup>67</sup> Link writes, “Broadly speaking, we may say that the *astheneia* word-

---

<sup>65</sup> M. Seitz and H.-G. Link, “κοπος,” in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 1, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan; Exeter, U.K.: Paternoster Press, 1986), 262.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 263.

<sup>67</sup> Hans-Goerg Link, “ἀσθένεια,” in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 3, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan; Exeter, U.K.: Paternoster Press, 1986), 993.

group is found in its literal sense chiefly in the Synoptic Gospels and in John, whereas the figurative sense, resulting from theological reflection, occurs predominantly in the Pauline literature.”<sup>68</sup> Especially significant for this study is Paul’s frequent use in 2 Corinthians (14x) as he describes his own weakness and the sufferings he has gone through. Yet, he again states emphatically the positive benefit of his weaknesses, that God’s strength dwells in him because of and through his weakness (2 Cor. 12:9-10)! Black writes regarding 2 Cor. 12:9:

This verse is . . . the crowning point of Paul’s view on weakness. From this vantage point the abject weakness of God’s servant is seen in its proper perspective and the fundamental significance of ἀσθένεια for the Christian is most clearly revealed. The very *raison d’être* of Paul’s existence as an apostle and as a Christian appears to be grounded in these words of the resurrected Lord, “My grace is sufficient for you.” This is why all boasting is excluded: for Paul all strength is a gift of God, the result of the free bestowment of the grace of God. This grace suffices . . . for all Paul’s labors, all his trials, all his conquests, and especially suffices for his thorn.<sup>69</sup>

In Paul’s understanding of the inverted kingdom of God, weakness is strength, the weak things shame the strong (1 Cor. 1:27), the powerful (Christ) has died for the powerless (Rom. 5:8), and weakness brings joy (2 Cor. 13:9). Paul is able to maintain these tensions because he understands that there is more to life than is immediately apparent. Suffering, though apparently evil, often results in unimaginable good. Connected with weakness is the word *ptōchos*, which Paul uses seven times in speaking of those who are impoverished.

Additionally, Paul frequently connects sin and suffering with *death*. Although it may be helpful to note the frequency of his use of a term such as *thanatos* (96x), it does little to advance an understanding of the subject matter, since he very rarely connects such words to the suffering of the righteous. Similarly, he uses words for destruction – *apōleia* (17x),

---

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 994.

<sup>69</sup> David Alan Black, *Paul, Apostle of Weakness: Astheneia and its Cognates in the Pauline Literature* (New York: P. Lang, 1984), 151.



*phtheirō* (17x) *olethros* (5x) – that may have only slight significance when it comes to understanding the topic. However, it should be noted that Paul’s common usage of these words relays a sense of the sinfulness that lies at the root of suffering, the loss of “shalom” that faces humanity, the sense of despair that people endure apart from Christ. Conversely, *in Christ*, death and destruction have no lasting power over the righteous (1 Cor. 15:54-57). Even in death, God brings victory through Christ.

### Patience and Endurance

Paul is especially concerned that the churches remain faithful to God during the suffering and persecution they are facing, so he often encourages them to endure patiently, to persevere. His main word for this is *hypomenō* / *hypomonē* (20x), from *menō*, “remain, stay,”<sup>70</sup> meaning to “stand one’s ground, hold out, endure in trouble, affliction, persecution.”<sup>71</sup> Those who persevere will benefit by improving in character (Rom. 5:4) and hope (Rom. 5:4; 15:4); reigning with Christ (2 Tim. 2:12), and receiving eternal life (Rom. 2:7). Likewise, perseverance is seen as an essential quality of all who wish to serve God (1 Tim. 6:11; 2 Tim. 3:10). Paul also uses *anechōnai* (11x) and *makrothumia* (12x, weaker usages) to designate patience and endurance. Again, Paul’s use of these words suggests a wholeness that is as of yet unattained, though in the interim such trials produce very concrete benefits in the lives of believers.

---

<sup>70</sup> Ulrich Falkenroth and Colin Brown, “ὕπομένω,” in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 2, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan; Exeter, U.K.: Paternoster Press, 1986), 772.

<sup>71</sup> Bauer et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 845.

### Conflict, Discipline, and Imprisonment

Three final, somewhat related concepts Paul uses that need to be considered for their connection to sin and suffering are those of *conflict*, *imprisonment*, and *discipline*. Paul's main word for conflict is *agōna* (11x), which means "fight" or "struggle." Five of these uses are in Paul's letters to Timothy, in which he speaks of the "good" (*kalos*) fight (1 Tim. 6:12; 2 Tim. 4:7) and relates this to keeping the faith. Three uses in Colossians (1:29; 2:1; 4:12; cf. 1 Thess. 2:2) all have to do with struggling or labouring on behalf of the Church. Paul once more writes about difficulty that has a greater purpose (cf. 1 Cor. 9:25). Other words Paul uses in a similar sense are *eris* (14x), which is strife or contention,<sup>72</sup> and *strateuomai* (6x), which has to do with being a soldier and waging war. This motif of struggle and battle in Paul would have been easily understood in the Roman Empire as something difficult that produced foreseeable results such as conquering and providing security.

Connected to this is a sense of struggling through difficulty as discipline. Paul uses *paidueō* (8x), "correct," "discipline," "train." People are to be disciplined by their fathers (Eph. 6:4), by God (1 Cor. 11:32), by the Scriptures (2 Tim. 3:16), and by other believers (2 Tim. 2:25). However, those who blaspheme may be "handed over to Satan" to be disciplined (1 Tim. 1:20). This, of all the terms discussed so far, has the least connection to sin, and it begs the question as to whether *some* forms of pain and/or suffering actually have intrinsic value (this will be briefly discussed in chapter 7).

---

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 309.

Paul suffered much at the hands of both Jews and Gentiles, not the least of which was imprisonment. His word for the chains he received is *deō* (18x), “bound” or “imprisoned.” All five times he uses the cognate *desmios*, it is in reference to himself as a “prisoner of the Lord” (Eph. 3:1; 4:1; 2 Tim. 1:8; Phm. 1, 9), and this theme pervades his use of the term in other contexts as well. Like his use of many other suffering words, even his chains serve to benefit the advance of the gospel (Phil. 1:13-4; 2 Tim. 2:8-9). Although peace does not come naturally to those in chains, God can make even imprisonment yield good results.

Paul is no stranger to suffering, and neither are the believers he wrote to. This may be seen in both the number of different terms used to describe aspects of suffering and the saturation of suffering language in Paul’s epistles. It is perhaps surprising to note how *positive* Paul remains while in chains, while being persecuted, while in weakness, while toiling, and even while grieving great losses. It is almost, to use clichés, that Paul sees a rose growing from each thorn or a silver lining on each cloud. While he never suggests that any form of suffering is “good,” he consistently makes his reader somehow aware that there is something good happening *in spite of* or even *because* of the suffering being experienced!

These suffering terms indicate a loss of peace, but they in no way suggest for the believer a loss of purpose or a lessening of God’s grace and care in their lives. In fact, Paul gives almost the exact opposite message in how he presents these terms, that grace comes *through* trials, that God’s purpose is found in the *midst* of whatever a believer may be going through. Still, none of this lessens the fact that suffering, in all its forms, is in itself evil and comes from sin. Though Paul maintains a dual perspective on suffering, the one who endures it knows only too well of its malevolence, as will be discussed in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 3

### SIN: THE ROOT OF SUFFERING

Why must people suffer? Why is there so much agony and distress in the world? Can it be that suffering is simply and always a result of sin? Is there always a direct link between the sin a person commits and the suffering or punishment he or she endures? Paul has much to say regarding the connection between sin and suffering.

#### All People Sin and Deserve to Suffer

Paul makes it abundantly clear that every naturally born person is a sinner and stands guilty before God (e.g. Rom. 3:23). Erickson suggests that “sin” can be defined as “any lack of conformity, active or passive, to the moral law of God. This may be a matter of act or thought, or of inner disposition or state.”<sup>73</sup> He summarizes that “sin is failure to live up to what God expects of us in act, thought, and being,”<sup>74</sup> and adds that “sin is simply failure to let God be God. It is placing something else, anything else, in the supreme place which is his.”<sup>75</sup>

Paul uses a common term for sin, *hamartia*, 87 times, and most of these appear in Romans (56x), primarily in chapters 5-8 (48x). He sees sin as a “ruling power”<sup>76</sup> which keeps

---

<sup>73</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 596.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 598.

<sup>76</sup> Bauer et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 43.

people from the best God has for them, causes them to “miss the target,” and makes them forget their dependence on God and see themselves as godlike.<sup>77</sup> “Paul’s indictment of humankind is that in declaring independence from the power of God, human beings have simply put themselves under the power of sin.”<sup>78</sup>

There is an overwhelming connection for Paul between sin and death. Where he writes most about sin, he also writes the most about death<sup>79</sup> (18 occurrences in Rom. 5:12-8:2). Dunn writes, “For Paul, death is not the intended outcome for humankind; it is the result of sin. The point is that life in this age can no more escape death than it can escape flesh, can no more escape death than it can escape sin.”<sup>80</sup> Paul clearly argues that death is the consequence of sin in Romans 5:12-19.<sup>81</sup> “Death spread to all men, because all sinned” (5:12) and “through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men” (5:18). This death that results from sin is not simply a physical death, but also a spiritual death, the death of the whole person, an eternal death: ultimate separation from God.<sup>82</sup> Sin is undeniably the ultimate cause of “the power of death in the created order.”<sup>83</sup>

Although Paul does not use *hamartia* in Romans 1, he makes clear the results of sin by his use of other terms such as *asebia* (ungodliness) and *adikia* (unrighteousness) in

---

<sup>77</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, MI and Cambridge, U.K.: Eerdmans, 1998), 112.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>81</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 652.

<sup>82</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1958), 258-259.

<sup>83</sup> Beker, *Paul the Apostle*, 229.

Romans 1:18 and following, culminating in a long list of vices resulting from the rejection of God (vv. 29-31) and the decree that “those who practice such things are worthy of death” (v. 32). It should be noted that this list of “vices” ought also to be seen as causes and means of suffering (cf. 1 Cor. 5:10-11; 6:9-10; Gal. 5:19-21). Most of these vices are social and cause human relationships to break down, which in itself is a major source of suffering in this world.<sup>84</sup>

It is apparent throughout the Bible that sin is an affront to God’s holiness and that God takes it very seriously. Psalm 97:2 says that “Clouds and thick darkness surround Him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of His throne,” and 1 Peter 1:15-16, quoting Leviticus, says that because God is holy, he expects people to be likewise holy. It should not therefore be surprising that He should punish those who transgress. Exodus 20:5 says, “I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me. . . .” Berkhof writes, “The Bible abundantly testifies to the fact that God punishes both in this life and in the life to come.”<sup>85</sup>

Although Paul often makes the causal connection between sin and punishment and between sin and death, he seldom directly connects *specific sins* to *specific suffering*. There are a few exceptions. He unequivocally states in Romans 1:18-27 that God “gave them over . . . to impurity” (v. 24), “gave them over to degrading passions” (v. 26), and “gave them over to a depraved mind” (v. 28), and men received “in their own persons the due penalty of their error” (v. 27). The very next chapter states that God will “render to every man according to his deeds” (Rom. 2:6; from Psalm 62:12 and Prov. 24:12), and that the

---

<sup>84</sup> Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 124.

<sup>85</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 255.

disobedient will receive “wrath and indignation” (v. 8). “There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil” (v. 9). Those who do not obey are cursed (Gal. 3:10; from Deut. 27:26) and will receive retribution from God, eternal destruction (2 Thess. 1:8-9).

It is also very rare for Paul to connect the suffering of the *righteous* to sin. One clear exception is in 1 Cor. 11:29-32, where Paul writes that anyone who participates in the Lord’s Supper in an unworthy manner will be guilty (v.27) and bring judgment upon him or herself (v. 29); it is for this reason that some within the Church are “weak and sick, and a number sleep” (v.30). Paul connects sin in the lives of believers with sickness, suffering, and even death. However, Paul continues to write that even this should be seen as *discipline* from the Lord, “so that we will not be condemned along with the world” (v.32).

There are at least two other statements that can, in a general sense, be seen to make this connection of sin and suffering for *all people*, including believers. In Col. 3:25, Paul states, “For he who does wrong will receive the consequences of the wrong which he has done, and that without partiality.” Paul is contrasting this to his previous reminder of the inheritance believers will receive for serving the Lord. This is a broad statement of principle, that people do in fact reap what they sow. Similarly, Paul reminds Timothy that those wanting to get rich end up in “ruin and destruction” and have “pierced themselves with many griefs” (1 Tim. 6:9-10). Believer or not, those who seek riches in this life will suffer many trials.

Paul plainly believes that there is a *causal connection* between sin and punishment (and therefore suffering). Those who disobey God’s righteous commandments will receive

the just retribution for their actions, just as those who obey Him will be rewarded. Because every person has sinned, all people stand under God's judgment and deserve to be punished.

### Much Suffering is Attributable to a Fallen World

All of this leads to a question, however: Is everyone *personally* responsible for his or her own sin and punishment, or is it attributable to Adam's transgression and the subsequent "fall" of creation? Romans 5:12 seems to say that it is both: "Therefore, just as *through one man* sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, *because all sinned . . .*" (emphasis mine). Sin and death came from and through Adam, yet all people have sinned and thus receive the penalty of death.<sup>86</sup> Dunn writes, "It thus becomes evident that Paul was operating with a double conception of death. In this case it is the distinction between the death of humanity as an *outcome* of Adam's first transgression and death as a *consequence* or even penalty for one's own individual transgressions. . . ."<sup>87</sup> What then is the connection between a fallen creation and the suffering all people endure?<sup>88</sup>

As a result of the entrance of sin into this world, the entire creation has been corrupted and disfigured. Berkhof describes this in the following manner:

Sin brought disturbance in the entire life of man. His physical life fell a prey to weakness and diseases, which result in discomforts and often in agonizing pains; and his mental life became subject to distressing disturbances, which often rob him of the joy of life, disqualify him for his daily task, and sometimes entirely destroy his mental equilibrium. His very soul has become a battlefield of conflicting thoughts, passions, and desires. The will refuses to follow the judgment of the intellect, and the

---

<sup>86</sup> There are obviously many views on *how* sin is spread and imputed, but that goes beyond the scope of this study and would add little to the primary point here that sin is a root cause of the suffering endured by the creation.

<sup>87</sup> Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 96.

<sup>88</sup> At least four times in Romans, Paul makes reference to Genesis 1-3 to explain the condition of humankind (1:18-32; 5:12-21; 7:7-13; 8:19-22). *Ibid.*, 90-91.



passions run riot without the control of an intelligent will. The true harmony of life is destroyed, and makes way for the curse of the divided life. Man is in a state of dissolution, which often carries with it the most poignant sufferings. And not only that, but with and on account of man the whole creation was made subject to vanity and to the bondage of corruption. . . . Destructive forces are often released in earthquakes, cyclones, tornadoes, volcanic eruptions, and floods, which bring untold misery on mankind.<sup>89</sup>

Although Paul does not explicitly correlate the general suffering of humankind with Adam's sin, it is only a small step from seeing sin and death coming from Adam and seeing the corruption and futility of creation in the same way.<sup>90</sup> Romans 8:20-23 equates the groaning of the believer (v. 23) with the groaning of the "whole creation" (v. 22). Just like believers still suffer as a result of Adam's sin, "waiting eagerly" for redemption, the whole creation is "in hope" that it "will be set free."

The good news for the creation and believer alike, however, is that suffering "is an alien intrusion into God's good world."<sup>91</sup> The new universe will be free from it completely. The book of Job suggests that at least some suffering consists of a satanic attack upon the Creator and His creation. Jesus likewise made this clear, as He described the crippled woman in Luke 13 as being *bound by Satan* (v. 16) and by His rebuking of disease the same way he rebuked demons (Luke 4:39). Paul referred to his "thorn in the flesh" as a "messenger from Satan" (2 Cor. 12:7).<sup>92</sup>

Suffering is therefore also attributable to the sinful spiritual forces that have power in this fallen world. Paul wrote that the struggle for the Christian is "not against flesh and blood,

---

<sup>89</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 259-260.

<sup>90</sup> Smith, *Paul's Seven Explanations*, 146-147.

<sup>91</sup> Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 313.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Eph. 6:12). Although this world was created for God and to serve Him, it is currently under Satan’s control. Erickson writes, “The persons and institutions that exercise negative influence in this world are not the ultimate source of evil that occurs. Behind this theme is Satan’s activity. At times this may take the form of demon possession, but it is usually more subtle.”<sup>93</sup> Paul understands sin and suffering as resulting from Adam’s sin, from the continuing sin of humankind, and from the evil spiritual forces that operate in opposition to God.<sup>94</sup>

#### Suffering is Both Directly and Indirectly Connected to Sin

If, then, humankind lives in a fallen world, and sin is the root cause of suffering because all have sinned, is it correct to say that individual suffering is directly related to individual sins? In other words, *is there a direct, one to one correlation between sin and suffering*, so that every case of suffering (or death) is a direct result of the sins of the one suffering? On one hand, it is often apparent that people suffer because of their own sins and mistakes, receiving punishment for crimes or reaping the results of poor choices. On the other hand, there are countless examples of seemingly innocent children, for example, who are afflicted with all manner of diseases and deformities, of earthquakes, tsunamis, and fires that cause great and seemingly random havoc. There seem to be both *direct* and *indirect* correlations between sin and suffering.

---

<sup>93</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 664.

<sup>94</sup> How these interact with one another, or which cause is involved in any given situation, is not answered in Paul. James teaches that sin and death come from people being enticed by their own evil desires (1:13-15; 4:1) and that the tongue is a cause of great evil (2:6), yet he also warns believers to resist the devil (4:7). It would seem that sin is attributable to all these sources, yet people remain responsible for their actions.

### Direct Correlations

In Galatians 6:7-8, Paul teaches a common biblical theme of sowing and reaping: “Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life.” Natural laws are at work, for just as a seed that is sown will produce a crop particular to the type of seed planted, so will a life produce consequences, both positive and negative, based on deeds done. However, though God often works through natural channels, through the physical and psychological laws He created, He also works in other means.<sup>95</sup>

Some theologians make a distinction between the “natural” and “positive” penalties of sin.<sup>96</sup> “Natural” penalties are these “sowing and reaping” effects, where people *generally* suffer the consequences for their actions. For example, one who abuses his or her body with drugs *may* suffer all sorts of negative results from that abuse, such as lung cancer or AIDS. The person who disobeys traffic laws *may* die or be injured in a car accident as a direct result of his or her disobedience to the law. People who are lazy *often* come to poverty. In these cases, there is a cause and effect relationship between the sin and the consequence of some kind of suffering. Believers of all times have picked up on this. Hall writes:

So explicit was the causal connection between sin and suffering in many forms of preliberal Christianity that every pious sufferer, under the influence of such stern and doctrinaire codes of religion, was driven to inquire after the personal wickedness by which that suffering must have been caused – often in the process, of course, vastly complicating the suffering itself by adding to it a gruesome weight of guilt. The belief

---

<sup>95</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 628.

<sup>96</sup> E.g. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 255-256.

that suffering is punishment for sin, inflicted by a God whose judgment or purgation begins already in this life, is firmly rooted in almost all forms of empirical Christianity.<sup>97</sup>

“Positive” penalties are similar to “natural” penalties in that suffering or punishment is a direct result of sin, but the difference is that the sinner is directly punished, either by God Himself (as in the cases of Sodom and Gomorrah, Achan, and Ananias and Sapphira) or by those given authority to enact the law that He has given. Berkhof suggests that the Bible usually refers to these kinds of penalties, especially in the Old Testament. “God gave Israel a detailed code of laws for the regulation of its civil, moral, and religious life, and clearly stipulated the punishment to be meted out in the case of each transgression, cf. Ex. 20-23.”<sup>98</sup> This is why, in Romans 13:1 and following, Paul instructs believers to be in subjection to the governing authorities, who derive their power from God (v. 1) and are in fact ministers (v. 4) and servants (v. 6) of God for the good of the people (v. 4). Those who resist these authorities will be punished (v. 2). So sin has a direct correlation to suffering, as seen in both “natural” and “positive” penalties attached to it by God’s decree.

#### Indirect Correlations

Though much suffering comes directly from sin, experience tells us that not all suffering can be directly attributed to specific, individual sin. Using the examples from the above section, some may suffer from AIDS or lung cancer *who have never used drugs*. People who obey traffic laws *may still be injured or killed* in car accidents. Individuals who work hard all their lives *may still come to poverty*. It may be argued that any of these people

---

<sup>97</sup> Douglas John Hall, *God and Human Suffering: An Exercise in the Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986), 76.

<sup>98</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 256.

will have committed other sins and are thus guilty and deserving of punishment, but what of the baby who is born deformed and gasps for every breath? What of seemingly innocent children raped, beaten, and murdered? Does the suffering, the “punishment,” directly coincide with the sins? What of the perpetrators of such crimes who live lives of comfort and ease? There is not always a direct cause and effect relationship between sin and suffering.

It is often assumed, as by Job’s friends, that people suffer as a direct result of sin. Yet Job is not guilty of anything to justify his suffering. He is a man of integrity. “The readers know this to be true: Job is suffering because God is demonstrating his servant’s spiritual integrity to Satan, not because Job is being punished.”<sup>99</sup> His friends cannot accept the idea that he is suffering apart from a punishment for sin. It frightens them that the world might not work the way they think it does, because if this is the case, they, too, are not safe: they too may suffer without “just cause” (Job 6:21).<sup>100</sup> God nowhere suggests that Job’s suffering is a result of his sin; no charge is made of Job except that he is willing to justify himself by condemning God.<sup>101</sup> God never explains to Job why he is suffering, but the book of Job makes it clear that there are higher reasons for some suffering than simply as a result of sin.

Like Job’s friends, the disciples of Jesus assumed that suffering resulted from sin, as can be seen in their question concerning the blind man in John 9:2: “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?” Jesus answered that it was neither, “but it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him” (v. 3). Similarly, in Luke 1:1-5, Jesus spoke of Galileans who had been killed by Pilate and those who had been killed by the

---

<sup>99</sup> Carson, *How Long O Lord?*, 161.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

falling of the tower in Siloam. He asked, rhetorically, if His listeners supposed that these people were worse sinners than those who were not killed. Answering his own questions, Jesus twice said, “I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish” (v. 3,5).

Jesus was making at least two points here. First, there is not always a direct correlation between sin and suffering. The man was not born blind because he sinned or because his parents sinned. Jesus does not even suggest that it is because of a fallen world, though at the root, there is undoubtedly that connection. Rather, it was for God’s glory. The people who died in these two incidents were not necessarily more sinful than anyone else. God’s purposes are not understood. Second, in Luke, Jesus makes it clear that *everyone* deserves to perish. Suffering is not always a direct result of sin, and a *lack of suffering* does not suggest that a person is *innocent* of sin. The consistent direct cause and effect correlation of sin to suffering falls on two counts.

Most of Paul’s own suffering comes under this category of an indirect correlation between sin and suffering. Certainly Paul was a sinner (“worst of sinners” 1 Tim. 1:16, NIV), having persecuted the Church and having been part of the murder of Christians (e.g. Acts 8:1), yet his sufferings were primarily related to his *obedience* to God and not his disobedience! It was as a *believer* that he suffered his beatings and imprisonments, and he constantly comforted his churches that they were not suffering for their *sins* but for their *righteousness*, due to the sins of others and the fallen creation (see next section).

Paul makes the connection between sin and suffering, but not always directly. However, it is critical to recognize that there is often more going on than people are able to see and that God has higher purposes than simply providing a consistent and observable “cause and effect” formula. As will be demonstrated over the next several chapters, Paul’s

understanding of the suffering of the righteous is very clearly in the classification of “higher purposes.” Suffering is evil, but God brings purpose, meaning, and benefits to it.

### The Righteous Must Expect to Suffer for Now

Because this world is fallen, all people must expect to suffer, including – and *especially*– the righteous. Smith writes,

God has ordained that the righteous and the wicked should co-exist until the eschaton, a fact that sometimes leads to the persecution of the former by the latter. . . . For inscrutable reasons, often he suspends the application of retributive justice, allowing the wicked to have their way with their counterparts. This results in a temporary inversion of the moral order. Thus the righteous suffer unjustly at the hands of the wicked. There will, nonetheless, be an eschatological meting out of retributive justice, when the righteous will be rewarded and the wicked punished. The righteous, moreover, may be harried, not only by wicked human beings, but also by Satan (or one of his other designations) and other evil spirits, who are conceived as being as hostile to the righteous as they are to God. God allows these spiritual beings to bring suffering upon the righteous. The righteous are exhorted to look for vindication in the future, at the time when God will bring judgment and salvation to the world. Until then, they must patiently endure the hostility of the wicked, human or otherwise.<sup>102</sup>

There are several explicit examples in Paul that demonstrate his belief that the righteous must expect to suffer. In 1 Thessalonians 3:1-4, Paul states that his readers themselves knew that they had been destined to suffer (v. 3). “For indeed when we were with you, we kept telling you in advance that we were going to suffer affliction [*thlibō*]; and so it came to pass, as you know” (v. 4). Similarly in 2 Timothy 3:12-13, after describing some of his own trials, Paul makes the statement, “Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted [*diōkō*]. But evil men and impostors will proceed from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.” The Holy Spirit had warned him that “bonds [*desmos*] and afflictions [*thlipsis*]” would face him in every city he visited (Acts 20:23).

---

<sup>102</sup> Smith, *Paul's Seven Explanations*, 9.

Paul also makes the expectation of suffering clear in Romans 8:36. Quoting Psalm 44:22 (43:22 in LXX), he writes, “Just as it is written, ‘For your sake we are being put to death all day long; we were considered as sheep to be slaughtered.’” As Calvin wrote, “It is no new thing for the Lord to permit his saints to be undeservedly exposed to the cruelty of the ungodly.”<sup>103</sup> A similar concept is seen in Phil. 1:29 and elsewhere in Paul.

Suffering, then, is to be an expectation for the believer. As Lewis wrote, “It ought to be clear that the real problem is not why some humble, pious, believing people suffer, but why some do *not*.”<sup>104</sup> The writers of the Bible are seemingly more surprised with God’s mercy and patience than with the fact that he chooses to punish and that people suffer.<sup>105</sup> Yet many Christians today seem to believe that they deserve times of health and blessing, and that times of difficulty and suffering are unfair.<sup>106</sup> Paul makes it clear that the righteous will *necessarily* suffer, not simply as a result of their sin (though this *will* be the case if they are sinning), but because they live in a fallen world that opposes anything of God.

Though the righteous should expect to suffer, it is equally clear that this suffering is “temporary,” as Smith suggested. In 1 Corinthians 7:28-31, Paul writes that there will be trouble (*thlipsis*) for those who marry, but the time is short, and “the form of this world is passing away” (v. 31). In 2 Corinthians 4:16-18, he states that they do not lose heart in the midst of trials because their “inner man is being renewed day by day. For *momentary*, light affliction [*thlipsis*] is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison,

---

<sup>103</sup> Calvin, quoted in Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 544.

<sup>104</sup> Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 104.

<sup>105</sup> Carson, *How Long O Lord?*, 48.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.



while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are *temporal*, but the things which are not seen are eternal” (emphasis mine). In comparison to the eternal reward coming, suffering can be considered “momentary” and “light.” It will not last beyond this lifetime and this world. Just as there will be an end to sin, there will be an end to death and suffering. Beker writes,

Paul’s theodicy is apocalyptically grounded. Only from the perspective of our final destiny in the resurrection of the dead, when death, “the last enemy,” has been defeated, only from that wholistic perspective can we grasp the meaning of the parts and fragments that make up our life in the world (1 Cor. 13:12). Only at that time will the sighing of the Christian and the creation, and also our query about so much seemingly meaningless suffering in the world, make place for the joy of the total creation in the embrace and glory of God.<sup>107</sup>

### Summary

That suffering is intrinsically related to sin is generally evident from Scripture and is widely accepted in a Christian worldview. Therefore, a lot has been written about that connection in much of the suffering genre.<sup>108</sup> A biblical-exegetical approach also picks up on this and reinforces these themes, providing a foundation for other themes and patterns to be discussed in this study, some of which are not found in the wider literature on suffering.

It has been demonstrated in this chapter that there is a strong and consistent relationship between sin and suffering in the Bible and in Paul particularly. Every person is a sinner and deserves death, both physical and spiritual, yet death and suffering also come because we live in a fallen world and because spiritual forces cause much harm as they seek

---

<sup>107</sup> Beker, *Paul the Apostle*, 234.

<sup>108</sup> C.S. Lewis, for example, devotes two entire chapters to “Human Wickedness” and “The Fall of Man.” *The Problem of Pain*, 48-85. Similarly, the “free will defense” has sinful choice as its basis for its theodicy.

to destroy all that God stands for. Furthermore, suffering has both a direct and an indirect correlation to sin, so that some, but not all, suffering can be identified as directly resulting from a person's sin. For the believer, suffering is to be expected – but temporary – because God has allowed, for the time being, the righteous and the wicked to co-exist.

Because God is sovereign and good, however, believers can trust Him to make things right and to bring them through trials into His glorious kingdom. Believers are assured that suffering is not some big mistake or something out of God's control, but that it somehow serves a purpose in God's plan.<sup>109</sup> Knowing this ought to provide great hope and comfort for the believer.

This, then, is the first – albeit smaller – part of Paul's reconciliation of the suffering of the righteous with God's sovereignty and goodness. Because the root cause of suffering is sin, God is neither responsible for nor the cause of it. Rather, as will be explained in the next three chapters, Paul shows that God's goal is the ultimate good of all who love Him, those He has called. God does not cause suffering, and He is actively making good come from it, causing it to benefit the one suffering, the Church, and Christ. Thus we see that Paul demonstrates a dual understanding of suffering, that it is evil but made beneficial.

---

<sup>109</sup> In describing God's sovereignty in relation to evil, Carson suggests: "God stands behind evil in such a way that not even evil takes place outside the bounds of his sovereignty, yet the evil is not morally chargeable to him: it is always chargeable to secondary agents, to secondary causes. On the other hand, God stands behind good in such a way that it not only takes place within the bounds of his sovereignty, but it is always chargeable to him, and only derivatively to secondary agents." Carson, *How Long O Lord?*, 213.

CHAPTER 4  
SUFFERING AS A BENEFIT TO THE CHRISTIAN

Although Paul understands sin to be the root cause of suffering, he regularly asserts that God is in control and is working for the ultimate good of those who belong to Him. This must include those who are enduring trials. In the context of his well-known description of the “absolute certainty of God’s sovereign plan of salvation”<sup>110</sup> in Romans 8:28-30, Paul relates the promise that “God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” (v. 28).

By “all things,” Paul probably had in mind primarily “the sufferings of the present time” (8:18), but it should not be restricted only to these. “Anything that is part of this life – even our sins – can, by God’s grace, contribute toward ‘good.’”<sup>111</sup> It is important to define this “good” in God’s terms and not merely our own. It does not simply refer to a materialistic perspective whereby believers “get” whatever they want. Rather, it includes suffering and trials that “contribute to our ‘good’ only by refining our faith and strengthening our hope.”<sup>112</sup>

Those who “love God” are *all* believers because believers, and only believers, have the inner orientation of love for God, regardless of whether or not they *feel* love toward God

---

<sup>110</sup> Beker, *Paul the Apostle*, 363.

<sup>111</sup> Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 529.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

or act that way at any given time.<sup>113</sup> The reason that believers can be confident that God is bringing ultimate good from the circumstances of this life is that all is being done according to His purposes. Although it has been long debated what God's *calling* entails (i.e. whether effectual or not), the point here (and in the verses following) is that God is working according to His own purposes, and what He purposes *will* invariably come to pass.<sup>114</sup> Therefore, no matter what a believer faces, he or she can be assured that God will bring ultimate good out of it.

There are numerous other places in which Paul asserts his belief that God has the believer's best interests at heart. In 1 Corinthians 10:13, he gives the promise that God will not allow his children to be tempted (or tested<sup>115</sup>) beyond what they are able to handle, and will provide a way to escape, in order that they may endure it. In 2 Corinthians 1:3-5, Paul describes the "abundant" comfort (v. 5) that the "Father of mercies and God of all comfort" (v. 3) will provide in "all our affliction" (v. 4). Similarly, he speaks of "God, who comforts the depressed" (2 Cor. 7:5). He refers to God's deliverance "from so great a peril of death" who "will yet deliver us" (2 Cor. 1:10), reminding believers of His ability to help them because He is the same "God who raises the dead" (v. 9). This deliverance theme is likewise seen in 2 Tim. 4:18, where Paul declares his confidence that God would "rescue me from every evil deed, and will bring me safely to His heavenly kingdom." He had himself received

---

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 530.

<sup>114</sup> Again, there is discussion on this issue in the debate of the "openness of God," but Paul chooses not to speculate on this matter, and therefore it will not be pursued here, either.

<sup>115</sup> The idea here is of a trial that a person is enduring. Zodhiates writes of *peirazō*, "To try, to prove in either a good or bad sense, tempt, test by soliciting to sin." Spiros Zodhiates, ed., *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*, rev. ed. (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 1993), 1135.

God's promise of deliverance from the time of his conversion (Acts 26:15-17). He reminds the Thessalonians that the believer's destiny is not God's wrath, but salvation (1 Thess. 5:9-10).

From the outset, then, it has been hypothesized that Paul understands suffering to be evil but used for good by God. The second part of this dual understanding of suffering will now be demonstrated, starting with the benefits God brings to the one who is suffering, which include *sanctification, identification with Christ, and hope of reward.*

### The Benefit of Sanctification

God is constantly working in believers, setting them apart from sin and making them holy. We call this process, which continues throughout the life of a believer, "sanctification."<sup>116</sup> Paul writes that he is confident that God, who started a good work in the believers in Philippi, would continue to complete it in them (Phil. 1:6; cf. 1 Cor. 1:8).

Although this is clearly God's work, believers also have a responsibility. Paul encourages the Philippians: "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure" (Phil 2:12b-13). God certainly has many means at His disposal to accomplish these things, yet it is surprising how often Paul connects suffering with sanctification.

### Sanctification through Perseverance

One of the ways that Paul shows that suffering leads to sanctification is by insisting that the difficulties a believer faces actually lead to a greater ability to persevere. This is, in

---

<sup>116</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 980.

many ways, self-evident, yet it is important to Paul and therefore considered in this study. An example of this is seen in Romans 5:1-5:

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God. And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

Having previously described justification in Romans 1-4, Paul now shows that justification has visible results (as can be seen in the “therefore” of 5:1).<sup>117</sup> As a result of their justification, believers have *peace* with God (v. 1),<sup>118</sup> obtain *grace*, and exult in *hope* (v. 2).<sup>119</sup> Yet many, especially Jewish objectors, might ask how Paul can say that believers are enjoying peace (*eirēnē*) when they are in fact facing so many different kinds of trials, so Paul takes a characteristically “offensive posture.”<sup>120</sup> He demonstrates that not only is peace possible in the midst of suffering, but tribulations (*thlipsis*) themselves are something to *exult* in, too! But how is this possible?

Paul presents a chain of logic that shows that tribulations actually produce hope in the lives of believers.<sup>121</sup> First, tribulations produce perseverance (*hypomonē*) in believers. As

---

<sup>117</sup> Moo suggests that “therefore, having being justified by faith” sums up the central teaching of the first four chapters of Romans. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 298.

<sup>118</sup> An objective reality, based on justification, that believers are no longer enemies of God. Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; Leicester, England: Apollos, 1988), 218.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

<sup>120</sup> Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 302.

<sup>121</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1998), 255. See also Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross*, 342. Gorman suggests that it was “commonplace in antiquity that suffering could serve as a kind of school for character building.”

Christians go through trials, they are made stronger, and they are enabled to endure more and more. Paul often connects such perseverance to an eschatological hope (Rom. 2:7; 8:25; 15:4; 2 Cor. 1:6-7; 1 Thess. 1:3). This perseverance produces “proven character” (*dokimazō*; cf. James 1:2-4), which holds the idea of a person who has been put to the test and approved by their right response.<sup>122</sup> This new strength of character in turn produces hope (*elpis*), which is a “desire of some good with expectation of obtaining it.”<sup>123</sup> Moral transformation resulting from trials assures believers that God is faithfully working in their lives, and this produces further assurance that future glory is not an illusion, that God will complete the process He has begun.<sup>124</sup> Verse 5 reminds believers that it is God’s love that ultimately motivates believers and assures us that He will accomplish what He has promised: our total and complete salvation.<sup>125</sup>

This theme of suffering producing perseverance (and therefore hope) is found throughout Paul’s writings. Paul instructs believers in Romans 12:12 to be “rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer. . . .” In Romans 15:3-5, Paul applies Psalm 69:9 to Christ, reminding believers that as Christ suffered for them, so would they suffer, and “that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.” The believer who loves as God loves, “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1 Cor. 13:6). Additional passages in Paul speaking to perseverance

---

<sup>122</sup> Bauer et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 202.

<sup>123</sup> Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary*, 570.

<sup>124</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 256.

<sup>125</sup> Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 221.

include 1 Cor. 4:12-13; 2 Thess. 1:3-10; 2 Tim. 3:10-13; 4:5-8; Titus 2:2. To Paul, one way sanctification is seen as a benefit of suffering is through the perseverance that is produced.

### Sanctification through Reliance on God

A second aspect of this benefit of sanctification through suffering is the development in a believer of *reliance on God*. A good place to begin looking at this theme is the well-known passage of 2 Corinthians 12:7-10:

Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me – to keep me from exalting myself! Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.

Black writes, "Nowhere do we see the subtleties of Paul's weakness terminology more clearly than in these verses in which the full force of Paul's apology for his weakness comes to the fore. His overall objective is to show that God's power is more clearly seen in weakness than in Paul's own strength, for ἀσθένεια is not a hindrance to God's working, but the requirement for it."<sup>126</sup> But is this weakness of Paul's necessarily to be equated with suffering? Certainly from the context of 2 Corinthians, which contains numerous "catalogues of suffering" (including one at the end of the previous chapter), and the connection between the "thorn" in verse 7 and the immediate language of weakness that follows in verse 9, it would seem that Paul is making this point. In verse 10, he also associates weaknesses, insults, distresses, persecutions, and difficulties.<sup>127</sup>

---

<sup>126</sup> Black, *Paul, Apostle of Weakness*, 147.

<sup>127</sup> Gorman writes, "Paul characterizes himself as 'weak' . . . and he considers each and every specific kind of suffering as a 'weakness' . . ." Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross*, 284.



Throughout 2 Corinthians, Paul defends himself against opponents who apparently accuse him, on account of his weaknesses, of not being fit to be an apostle. It would seem that his opponents believed themselves more qualified than he was, based on gifts and visions that they had received. Yet Paul argues that he, too, has gifts and visions, but in fact it is his *tribulations* that prove above all that he is an apostle of Christ.<sup>128</sup> Smith suggests, “Contrary to their way of thinking, Paul would have his detractors believe that God actually requires apostles to be weak, and if they are not naturally so, he will take measures to make them so.”<sup>129</sup> Schreiner similarly argues that Paul’s suffering actually *legitimated* his ministry, rather than disqualifying him, “for his response to his afflictions showed that he was empowered by the Spirit.”<sup>130</sup>

Paul, who had visions far surpassing those of most people (12:1-4), was given a “thorn in the flesh” to keep him from exalting himself. God used suffering to counterbalance Paul’s successes and cause him to face his limitations and rely on God for his strength.<sup>131</sup> Although it is impossible to know with certainty the nature of Paul’s “thorn” (*skolops* – used only here in the NT), most modern scholars concur that it refers to some kind of physical ailment,<sup>132</sup> and it is quite apparent that it caused him considerable distress. Paul considers the ailment a “messenger [*angelos*] of Satan,” which is not surprising, considering Paul’s use of

---

<sup>128</sup> Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians*, Word Biblical Commentary 40 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1986), 424.

<sup>129</sup> Smith, *Paul’s Seven Explanations*, 166.

<sup>130</sup> Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God’s Glory in Christ*, 90.

<sup>131</sup> Smith, *Paul’s Seven Explanations*, 167.

<sup>132</sup> David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, The New American Commentary 29 (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1999), 519. See also Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 414.

Satan as “God’s agent for the infliction of divine discipline in the body (cf. Job 2:1-5; 1 Cor 5:5; 11:30; 1 Tim 1:20).”<sup>133</sup> This is not to be seen as a literal messenger, but an indication that Paul believes his ailment is of Satanic origin.<sup>134</sup> Yet at the same time, he sees the thorn as being given to him *in God’s sovereignty* – it is given to keep him from exalting himself.<sup>135</sup> Paul, like Job, was afflicted by Satan, but only with God’s permission and for *His* greater purposes. Paul was *tormented* (*kolaphizō*, a word which implies “humiliating violence – being slapped around, and the present tense suggests it was persistent – something that happened over and over again”<sup>136</sup>), but he believed it was actually for his own good!

It is critical to recognize that Paul did not glory in suffering *itself*; in fact, he implored the Lord three times to take the “thorn” away from him. This may be three literal periods of prayer or it may simply signify “earnest and repeated prayer” time after time.<sup>137</sup> He may be drawing a parallel to Jesus’ three-fold prayer in Gethsemane.<sup>138</sup> Regardless, it is seen that Paul prayed fervently for its removal, perhaps out of concern that it might interfere with his ministry.<sup>139</sup> The result of his prayers was an assurance from God in verse 9 that His grace is “sufficient” and that Paul’s weaknesses would not hinder his service to God.<sup>140</sup> In fact it would better Paul’s service, for it would allow Christ’s power to work through him! Black

---

<sup>133</sup> Black, *Paul, Apostle of Weakness*, 154.

<sup>134</sup> Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 41.

<sup>135</sup> Carson, *How Long O Lord?*, 72.

<sup>136</sup> Garland, *2 Corinthians*, 522.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 521.

<sup>140</sup> Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 420.

rightly suggests: “*Human weakness paradoxically provides the best opportunity for divine power*” (emphasis his).<sup>141</sup> Paul took no pleasure in suffering and weakness, but only in the opportunity it gave him to rely on Christ to work through him and bring effectiveness to his ministry.<sup>142</sup>

This reliance upon God that results from suffering – this way in which God brings benefit to suffering by the sanctification of the believer – can also be seen at the beginning of 2 Corinthians, in 1:3-11. After writing about the *abundance* of suffering he and his fellow believers were experiencing and the comfort God provided in the midst of their trials (v. 5), he writes: “We were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life; indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves *so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead*” (vv. 8b-9; emphasis mine). Smith writes: “Paul uncovers a reason for which God allows the righteous to suffer: suffering is the most effective means by which the attitude of dependence is inculcated, without which there is no access to another power.”<sup>143</sup>

### Sanctification through Discipline

A third way that God uses suffering to sanctify the righteous is in *discipline*, both for the disobedient and for the obedient. First, in regard to disobedience, Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 11:27-32 that those who partake of the Lord’s Supper “in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty . . .” (v. 27) and bring judgment upon themselves (v. 29), and for this reason,

---

<sup>141</sup> Black, *Paul, Apostle of Weakness*, 237.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>143</sup> Smith, *Paul’s Seven Explanations*, 161.

many are “weak and sick, and a number sleep” (i.e. have died; v. 30). Yet verse 32 shows that even this judgment upon believers is to be considered “discipline” (*paideuō*), or correction, or guidance.<sup>144</sup>

A similar idea is found in 1 Corinthians 5:1-5, where Paul intends to “deliver” an immoral man “to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus” (v. 5). Likely, this refers to “some kind of expulsion from the Christian community . . . to turn him back out into Satan’s sphere.”<sup>145</sup> Regardless of the actual punishment Paul has in mind, as Smith writes, “The purpose of this disciplinary action is clearly salvific: it is in order that his spirit be saved.”<sup>146</sup> This discipline is ultimately for his own good!

Second Corinthians 7:5-11 speaks of a letter Paul sent to the Corinthians that had caused them great sorrow (v. 8). Paul rejoiced that the end result of this sorrow, this suffering, was that they were “made sorrowful to the point of repentance . . . made sorrowful according to the will of God . . .” (v. 9). Paul added that this disciplinary letter he had written had done even more: “For behold what earnestness this very thing, this godly sorrow, has produced in you: what *vindication of yourselves*, what *indignation*, what *fear*, what *longing*, what *zeal*, what *avenging of wrong*! In everything you demonstrated yourselves to be *innocent* in the matter” (v. 11; emphasis mine). “Paul is quick to point out that the effect of the sorrow of the Corinthians is not death, but life. . . . The godly sorrow produced . . . in the

---

<sup>144</sup> Bauer et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 603.

<sup>145</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 208-209.

<sup>146</sup> Smith, *Paul’s Seven Explanations*, 85.

Corinthians verifiable results.”<sup>147</sup> Whether it is sorrow that comes from the guilt of sin or whether it is grief experienced from a broken relationship with Paul, God is able to take these situations and use them to purify believers, to sanctify them, to bring them closer to Himself.

The goal of the disciplinary process is that Christians become holy, and this is also seen in the lives of those who suffer out of obedience. In 2 Corinthians 8:1-5, Paul writes about the churches of Macedonia, who, “in a great ordeal of affliction” (*thlipsis*) were extremely joyful and generous in their giving. As mentioned above, the result of Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” was that he was kept from becoming conceited (2 Cor. 12:7). Paul also wrote in 2 Corinthians 4:16-17 that although the afflictions (*thlipsis*) they faced caused outer decay, their “inner man [was] being renewed day by day.”

If suffering, as defined in chapter 1, can describe any negative experience or anything that causes mental anguish, it can be seen that Paul is demonstrating that God can use *whatever situation we find ourselves in* to mold us, to transform us, to make us into disciples who please Him. It seems strange in a world that recoils from affliction to think of suffering in this light, but that is the way of the cross, the way of the “upside down” kingdom that Paul proclaims. What seems to be one thing often is something completely different. What seems to be horrific is taken by God and made into something of beauty. It is sometimes suggested in jest that “whatever doesn’t kill me makes me stronger,” yet there *is* truth to that. When we accept suffering with a view that God has allowed it for a greater purpose, we are made stronger, in a sense. We may appear weaker to the world, as Paul appeared, but we become

---

<sup>147</sup> Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 234.

more useful vessels for Christ, as His power is “made perfect” in our weaknesses and in our many trials. Believers receive the benefit of sanctification through suffering.

### The Benefit of Identification with Christ

Closely connected to sanctification, yet deserving separate consideration, is the Pauline concept that suffering can lead to identification with Christ. Ahern writes:

Christian suffering has deep theological roots in [Paul’s] teaching on union with Christ. This doctrine, as we have seen, supposes that every Christian receives . . . the efficacy of the salvific death and resurrection once accomplished in the body of Christ to which he is now united: ‘Do you not know that we who have been baptized into Christ have been baptized into his death?’ (Rom 6:3). . . . The ‘gain’ of Paul’s conversion, therefore, (and of every Christian . . . ) consisted not merely in momentary death with Christ, but in the fact that it inaugurated a lifelong *state of death*, through the power of the Spirit, to the world, to the flesh, and to sin, both in his own life and in the lives of all those whom he must faint for Christ [emphasis his].<sup>148</sup>

The believer’s union with Christ is, as Paul writes, a “mystery” (Eph. 5:32), so we may not expect to grasp it completely.<sup>149</sup> Most often, Paul refers to this union as the believer being “in Christ” (e.g. 2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 2:10; 1 Thess. 4:16). Another word for this is “identification,” which suggests a subjective attitude that the believer has toward Christ, *based upon* the objective reality of his or her position “in Christ.” Believers, then, may understand their sufferings to be intrinsically connected to those of Christ. This is a “benefit” of suffering, for the subjective identification of believers with Christ gives substantiation to them that the objective reality of their position in Christ truly exists. As Paul wrote: “And if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him” (Rom. 8:17).

---

<sup>148</sup> Barnabas Ahern, “The Fellowship of His Sufferings (Phil 3, 10): A Study of Paul’s Doctrine on Christian Suffering,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 22, no. 1 (January 1960): 30-31.

<sup>149</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 965.

A look at Galatians 6:17 demonstrates this further: “From now on let no one cause trouble for me, for I bear on my body the brand-marks of Jesus.” Paul finishes his dealings in Galatians with the Judaizing threat in a similar fashion to which he began, by emphasizing his authority as an apostle and warning the Galatian churches against continued trouble-making.<sup>150</sup> All the difficulties he has experienced from these churches have been like a physical attack or “beating” (*kopos*) upon his person, he writes, mainly because he had such a great concern for his converts and had invested so much of his time and energy among them. His physical scars are representative of something much more important: his identification with Christ. It is possible that Paul had in mind the ancient oriental practice of showing one’s dedication to one’s god through being branded and thereby coming under the protection of that god.<sup>151</sup> Since Paul was a “marked man,” he warns the Galatian Christians that he should be troubled no more: he was under Christ’s protection and ownership, and so any who gave him trouble would therefore be judged by Christ.<sup>152</sup>

The marks themselves that Paul was referring to are most likely the physical marks and scars Paul had suffered in his work for the gospel, including the stoning he had received at Lystra (Acts 14:19; 2 Cor. 9:23 ff.).<sup>153</sup> The possessive genitive, “of Jesus,” suggests that Paul believed these marks to identify him as an apostle.<sup>154</sup> Dunn writes, “Paul sees his own

---

<sup>150</sup> Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians*, Word Biblical Commentary 41 (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1990), 299.

<sup>151</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians*, Black’s New Testament Commentaries (London: A & C Black, 1993), 346.

<sup>152</sup> Longenecker, *Galatians*, 300.

<sup>153</sup> Dunn, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians*, 347.

<sup>154</sup> Longenecker, *Galatians*, 300.

sufferings as a missionary as a working out of that identification with Jesus on the cross of which he had just spoken [6:14]. . . . The marks of his identification with Jesus' sufferings and death should be sufficient proof of the genuineness of his apostleship in the eyes of even the most conservative and trouble-making Christian Jew."<sup>155</sup>

Philippians 3:7-11 also shows Paul's identification with Christ in His sufferings:

But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, *that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death*; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead [emphasis mine].

As theologically rich as this passage is, especially considering the debate over "Christ-Mysticism,"<sup>156</sup> the primary concern at this time will be with verse 10 (italicized), with the rest serving as the context for this statement. Paul had lost so much by human standards, including his high status among the Pharisees. His gains were what? – beatings, imprisonment, difficulties among the churches, criticism, poverty? No, he had gained Jesus! Nothing else could compare with the blessings in Christ he enjoyed, so that he considered anything else mere "garbage" in comparison. In Christ he had found acceptance before God,

---

<sup>155</sup> Dunn, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians*, 347.

<sup>156</sup> Regarding this ongoing debate, L. Gregory Bloomquist writes, "Schweitzer's synthesis has become the dominant interpretive approach for understanding the suffering passages of Philippians (if not Paul generally): that believers' sufferings are the result of their real union with Christ and of participation in the sufferings of other believers. . . . Yet real union with Christ at present is not fully realized. There remains a coming eschatological and cosmic glory, a point recently emphasized by J. Christaan Beker." L. Gregory Bloomquist, *The Function of Suffering in Philippians*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 44-45. This supports separating the concepts of *subjective* identification versus *objective* union.



something his attempts to keep the Law could never provide.<sup>157</sup> Through faith in Christ, he was declared righteous! His suffering brought him closer to God in Christ.

But Paul was not content to simply know Jesus as a historical figure – he desired to “know” (*gnōnai* from *gnōskō*) Him, to have an intimate relationship with Him, a relationship that would transform him from living a life of death in sin to a new life in the Spirit, a life of conformity to Christ Himself.<sup>158</sup> Hawthorne suggests that a better interpretation is “to know him *in* the power of his resurrection” (rather than *and*): “to know him personally as the resurrected ever-living Lord of his life.”<sup>159</sup>

Paul understood his current suffering, and that of all believers, to be a participation in Christ’s suffering and the way to be conformed to the likeness of Christ, who was “obedient to the point of death” (Phil. 2:8), and who thereby stands as the example for all who follow Him. Just as Christ’s resurrection and exaltation resulted from his suffering and death, so those who belong to Him will experience the power of his resurrection through the path of suffering. “Through our suffering the significance of Christ’s suffering is manifested to the world, which is why in 1:29-30 Paul describes such suffering as ‘on behalf of Christ.’”<sup>160</sup> These two ideas then go together: Christ must be known by the power that comes from his resurrection and through participation in His sufferings. The Christian may not have one without the other.<sup>161</sup>

---

<sup>157</sup> John B. Polhill, *Paul & His Letters* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 174.

<sup>158</sup> Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, Word Biblical Commentary 43 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), 143-144.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>160</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 332.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 329.

Dunn writes,

What is particularly notable is the way Paul speaks of Christ's sufferings *after* he speaks of his resurrection. The process of sanctification does not consist in an initial dying with Christ followed in the course of that process by an experience of Christ's resurrection power. Paul's doctrine of salvation is quite different. The resurrection power of Christ manifests itself, and inseparably so, as also a sharing in Christ's sufferings. The process of salvation is a process of growing conformity to Christ's death. Only when that is completed (in death) can the final resurrection from the dead be attained (the resurrection of the body). Only when believers are fully one with Christ in his death will it be possible for them to be fully one with Christ in his resurrection.<sup>162</sup>

This passage has a strong parallel with Romans 6:3-11, which again demonstrates this concept of God using suffering to bring them into identification with Christ. Paul writes in verse 5: "For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection. . . ." Verse 11 says, "Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus." Likewise, Paul asserts in 2 Corinthians 4:10-11 that he and his companions were "always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh" (cf. 2 Tim. 2:11). Though positionally dead to sin because of Christ's death, Paul works hard to make this a practical reality in his life, as he is conformed to Christ in every way. Suffering that a believer experiences serves to deepen and strengthen this mystical union and identification with Christ, who likewise suffered.<sup>163</sup> Because Christians are incorporated into Christ's body, they share both His life and His death.<sup>164</sup>

---

<sup>162</sup> Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 487.

<sup>163</sup> Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 145.

<sup>164</sup> Ahern, "The Fellowship of His Sufferings," 18.

A similar thought is found in numerous other passages in Paul. Romans 8:17 says, “. . . if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him,” and 2 Corinthians 1:5 says, “For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ.” According to Smith, “sufferings of Christ” here is likely a “subjective genitive,” so that what they were experiencing was actually the sufferings that *belonged to Christ*, thus emphasizing the spiritual union that existed.<sup>165</sup> Gärtner writes of this same passage, “Such is the mystic union existing between Christ and his body the Church that their sufferings may be identified as one and the same.”<sup>166</sup> So strong was Paul’s identification with Christ that he wrote that he had been “crucified with Christ,” and it was now Christ living in him and not Paul who lived at all (Gal. 2:20).

In a society obsessed with identifying with the rich and famous, through clothes, styles, and memorabilia obtained, it must seem rather odd to see believers identify with a first century martyr! Of course, anyone looking inside our middle class churches might be surprised by the claim of such an identification. Yet that is what Paul calls for believers to do. This is not to be done through bumper stickers and “WWJD” pins, but through a life of sacrificial love and obedience, *which includes suffering!* It is the way of the cross to suffer hardships, and God is able to take those sufferings and use them to bring His children into subjective identification and into objective union with Christ. Not only does God use suffering to benefit believers through sanctification and identification, however, but He also uses it to bring an undying hope of reward.

---

<sup>165</sup> Smith, *Paul’s Seven Explanations*, 179.

<sup>166</sup> Burkhard Gärtner, “πάσχω,” in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 3, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan; Exeter, U.K.: Paternoster Press, 1986), 724.

### The Benefit of the Hope of Reward

For the one going through painful, difficult times, hope is difficult to come by, and despair can feel like a crushing weight, like a cold fog that infiltrates every muscle and every joint. Consider Job (Job 3:11-13), and Jeremiah (Jer. 20:14-15, 18) who, in the midst of their anguish wished they had never been born, or Moses (Num. 11:15), who pleaded for death rather than to suffer any further. Is it any surprise that less acclaimed believers also struggle with despair? Perhaps this is why Paul so frequently speaks of hope and why he so often connects suffering to glory, to the reward that is waiting for the faithful.<sup>167</sup> Sproul writes, “The pain of suffering in itself is enough to drive us to despair were we not persuaded of the redemption that lies before us.”<sup>168</sup>

A look at Romans 8:17-18 and 23-25 gives a good example of this concept in Paul:

. . . and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. . . . And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body. For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for who hopes for what he already sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it.

In this section of Romans, Paul is explaining how the power of sin is broken, and he emphasizes the assurance that believers have in Christ.<sup>169</sup> He speaks of the present reality of sin and suffering with a view to the eschatological hope that believers hold.

---

<sup>167</sup> I am not here speaking of specific “rewards” for suffering or for service, but of the confidence that rewards, whatever they may be, await the faithful at the end of this life.

<sup>168</sup> R. C. Sproul, *Surprised by Suffering* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1989), 82.

<sup>169</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 395.

In these few verses, “suffering,” “groan,” “waiting eagerly,” and “perseverance” are contrasted with “heirs,” “glory,” “first fruits,” “adoption,” “redemption,” and “hope.” Paul believes that the righteous must expect to suffer in this present age, but he also knows that the riches to come will in every way supersede all trials experienced now. It is the concept of an “inheritance” that Paul uses. Christians are adopted and truly part of the family now, but they do not receive all the benefits of that position until a later time (cf. Gal. 4:1-7). It is only through our present suffering that we may attain this glorious inheritance, and our oneness in Christ assures us that we are co-heirs and will also be glorified with Him.<sup>170</sup> Schreiner writes, “We should not be surprised that we have not yet realized all the blessings of our redemption since hope by definition means that future blessings are not yet ours.”<sup>171</sup>

The “sufferings [*pathema*] of the present time” are those of this age and not simply the current circumstances.<sup>172</sup> They are not only the difficulties encountered because of one’s confession of Christ, but they “encompass the whole gamut of suffering, including things such as illness, bereavement, hunger, financial reverses, and death itself.”<sup>173</sup> So, whatever believers face in this world, they can live assured that their endurance will lead to incomparable future reward. Just as “first fruits” represented a consecration of the entire harvest with only the beginning, believers have also received only a *foretaste* of the greater measure that is to come.<sup>174</sup> “The Spirit . . . is both the ‘first installment’ of salvation and the

---

<sup>170</sup> Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 504-505.

<sup>171</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 433.

<sup>172</sup> Leon Morris, *New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Academie Books, 1986), 319.

<sup>173</sup> Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 506.

<sup>174</sup> Morris, *New Testament Theology*, 323.

‘down payment’ or ‘pledge’ that guarantees the remaining stages of that salvation.”<sup>175</sup>

*Already* we have the first fruits of our salvation, but the greater portion remains for now in the *not yet* (see also 1 Cor. 15:20, 23).

Three times in this passage, Paul uses the rare double-compound for “eagerly wait” (*apekdechomai* – vv. 19, 23, 25), which combines the concepts of being eager and of enduring, of hope and of patience.<sup>176</sup> That is indeed how a believer must live, with feet firmly planted in the storms of this life but with eyes fixed upon the hope that lies ahead. Paul is realistic about the difficulties that face all who identify with Christ, but he reminds them again and again that endurance now will lead to great reward from the God who is faithful. God is therefore seen using suffering to produce hope in the lives of His children.

Many theologians see Romans 5-8 as a chiasm, with 5:1-11 (see above) and 8:18-39 both emphasizing the assurance of future glory following the suffering of this time.<sup>177</sup> Whether this structure is intended by Paul or not, there is a strong parallel here to be noted. Importantly, in neither passage does Paul indicate that an appropriate *response* to the troubles is necessary for the hope and glory to come, but rather that *God* will complete His work, even overcoming a believer’s tendency to “wilt under pressure.”<sup>178</sup> Therefore, as Moo writes, the result is that, “Sufferings, rather than threatening or weakening our hope, as we might expect to be the case, will, instead, increase our certainty in that hope.”<sup>179</sup>

---

<sup>175</sup> Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 519-520.

<sup>176</sup> Morris, *New Testament Theology*, 325.

<sup>177</sup> Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 294.

<sup>178</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 256.

<sup>179</sup> Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 303.

There are many other passages in which Paul asserts that God uses suffering in this way. In Acts 14:22, Paul states, after almost dying from a stoning in Lystra, “Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.” He makes similar statements in 2 Corinthians. In 4:10 he writes that he and his companions were “always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body”; in 4:17, he calls his sufferings “momentary, light affliction” which is “producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison”; and in 5:1-4 he speaks of the “earthly tent” which will be torn down and replaced by an eternal house from God, while meanwhile we groan, “longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven.”

Other significant passages include Galatians 3:3-4, which rhetorically asks if the Galatians suffered in vain. In other words, do they not realize that there is a goal for their temporary difficulties? In Philippians 3, Paul argues that he counts but loss even his impressive Jewish heritage, and he has identified instead with the sufferings of Christ, being conformed to His death, “in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead” (v. 11). He likewise affirms the Thessalonians for “perseverance and faith in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure.” Why? Because “This is a plain indication of God’s righteous judgment so that you will be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which indeed you are suffering” (2 Thess. 1:4b-5). Finally, in 2 Timothy, Paul writes that those who died with Christ will live with Him, and those who endure will also reign with Him (2:11). He declares that he himself has fought the fight, finished the race, and kept the faith, and as a result, “In the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day” (4:8; cf. 1:12).

Could it be that God uses the sufferings of this life, in His providence, to “make us homesick for heaven, to detach us from this world, to prepare us for heaven, to draw our attention to himself and away from the world of merely physical things”?<sup>180</sup> Or are we merely annoyed by suffering?! If the latter, it may be that we have an unbiblical view of suffering, and we may be missing out on what God has for us through our trials. Gorman writes, “For Paul . . . suffering is intimately connected to hope. . . . [It] leads not to despair but to the assurance of future salvation and glory. . . . Both the inevitability of suffering and the certainty of future glory are for him *theological and spiritual necessities*” (emphasis his).<sup>181</sup> Suffering to Paul, though evil in and of itself, was something he saw God using to benefit those suffering, including himself.

### Summary

Many theologians and writers dealing with the problem of suffering have discussed ways in which suffering produces growth and strength of character in the lives of those suffering. This is seen, for example, in Lewis and Carson, and it is especially highlighted in Barry Smith’s treatment of *Paul’s Seven Explanations of the Suffering of the Righteous*, in which five of his seven “explanations” fall into the category of benefiting the one suffering.<sup>182</sup> Many others emphasize suffering as making a person more compassionate, more able to love, as is seen particularly in Nouwen and Soelle. Weinandy, likewise, demonstrates that suffering is remedial and leads to holiness.<sup>183</sup>

---

<sup>180</sup> Carson, *How Long O Lord?*, 130.

<sup>181</sup> Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul’s Narrative Spirituality of the Cross*, 305.

<sup>182</sup> The other two explanations explain suffering as coming from sin, as has been discussed in chapter three.

<sup>183</sup> See Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 264-273.



This study has reiterated the wisdom of such explanations. It has also highlighted the less commonly discussed benefits of suffering for the righteous, including an increased identification with their suffering Savior and an amplified hope of future reward.<sup>184</sup> In this way, the value of an exegetically structured study is again demonstrated. Yet, as will be seen in the following two chapters, Paul also demonstrates less commonly discussed benefits of suffering that God brings out of and through affliction, namely benefits for the Church and benefits for Christ.

---

<sup>184</sup> Moltmann is one of the few to especially identify these last two points.

## CHAPTER 5

### SUFFERING AS A BENEFIT TO THE CHURCH

In our self-centered society, people often demand personal compensation for every injury, loss, and difficulty. In an age of “rights” and “freedoms” without “responsibilities,” it is frequently everyone for himself or herself. Whatever people *can* get, they *will* get, no matter what it costs somebody else. This is especially true in the midst of suffering. People find it easier to endure hardship if they can blame someone else, especially if they believe they will be compensated. This may be one reason lawsuits are so prevalent in the Western world and why lawyers are so numerous. Many injuries and trauma, we believe, can be offset by suing the one responsible. Will we all become victims demanding compensation?

This is, to a degree, human nature, and chapter 4 demonstrated that God does, in a sense, “compensate” those who suffer for His sake, through the process of sanctification, identification, and eternal reward. There *are* benefits that God brings to His children who are suffering. Many theologians and popular writers emphasize this, especially the aspect of sanctification, but they often stop there without seeming to engage the rest of the biblical data. Paul makes it clear that the benefits of suffering do not end with benefits to the one who suffers, but also overflow into the lives of other believers, into the community of the believer, into the Church.

### The Benefits of Unity and Encouragement

God made humankind for relationship, as can be seen beginning in Genesis 1-2.

Charles Sherlock, in *The Doctrine of Humanity*, describes our relationships as being both “horizontal” and “vertical.” Our horizontal relationships are our social interactions with other people (“male and female”); our downward vertical relationship is our stewardship (“dominion”) over the created world; and our upward vertical relationship is with God.<sup>185</sup>

God says in Genesis 2:18, “It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him,” and throughout the Old Testament He is seen gathering His people together in families and tribes, eventually calling out a nation of people for His very own.

In the New Testament, God calls out His Church, a single, unified organism, which He describes as the “body of Christ.”<sup>186</sup> This is one of Paul’s favourite metaphors for the people of God (cf. Rom. 12:4-5; 1 Cor. 6:19; Eph. 4:4-6, 15-16; Col. 1:18; 2:19), and he gives a lengthy description of it in 1 Corinthians 12:12-26 in the context of spiritual gifts. He begins by saying, “For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ” (v.12). He proceeds to explain that the body is diverse (vv. 14-18), it is not to be equated with any individual member (vv. 19-20), the members are entirely interdependent (v. 21), and even the weaker members are indispensable (vv. 22-25).<sup>187</sup> He concludes with this significant

---

<sup>185</sup> Charles Sherlock, *The Doctrine of Humanity*, ed. Gerald Bray (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 37.

<sup>186</sup> Gary L. Watts, *Painful Questions: Facing Struggles with Faith* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1999), 55.

<sup>187</sup> Polhill, *Paul & His Letters*, 246.

statement: “And if one member suffers [*paschō*], all the members suffer with it [*sumpaschō*]; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it” (v. 26).

This verb, *sumpaschō*, is only used twice in Paul (cf. Rom. 8:17), and it simply means to “suffer with.”<sup>188</sup> Paul also uses *oikteirō* to relay this concept of “compassion” or “mercy” that God has (Rom. 9:15; 12:1; 2 Cor. 1:3) and which believers are also to have for one another (Phil 2:1; Col. 3:12). Both the English words “patience” and “compassion” come from the Latin *pati* (from the Greek *paschō*), which means “suffering.” Therefore, as Nouwen writes, “The compassionate life could be described as a life patiently lived with others.”<sup>189</sup> Christians are to be unified, sharing in the whole spectrum of one another’s experiences, which includes both joys and sorrows (1 Cor. 12:26).

This concept is rather noticeable in 2 Corinthians 1:3-7:

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 will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ. But if we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; or if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which is effective in the patient enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer; and our hope for you is firmly grounded, knowing that as you are sharers of our sufferings, so also you are sharers of our comfort.

Second Corinthians is, in many ways, Paul’s most personal extant letter. This may be because it came following an intense conflict between him and the church. Paul was being personally attacked, along with the legitimacy of his apostleship and ministry, so he wrote 2 Corinthians at least partly in response to these attacks. In it, he speaks about “power in

---

<sup>188</sup> Bauer et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 779.

<sup>189</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, Donald P. McNeill, and Douglas A. Morrison, *Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life*, First Image ed. (NY: Doubleday, 1983), 92.

weakness, about strength through suffering, about life through death, about triumph through seeming defeat.”<sup>190</sup> He wishes to vindicate his ministry and especially the fact that he has suffered much as an apostle.

In these opening verses, after his greeting, Paul immediately alleges that there is another purpose to affliction: his sufferings are for their sake! Just as Paul had shared in Christ’s sufferings and therefore in His comfort, so they too share in Paul’s sufferings and therefore his comfort. Paul reminds the Corinthians that God has a *fatherly* compassion (*oikteirō*) for them and responds to their suffering with comfort (v. 3; cf. Ps. 103:13-14). God is truly concerned for their well-being. This word translated “comfort” (*paraklēsis*) is a cognate of the word Jesus used in John 14:16 (*paraklētos*) for the coming Holy Spirit, who would be a “Comforter” (AV) to believers forever. In 2 Corinthians 1:3-7, Paul uses *paraklēsis* no less than ten times, connecting it to words for suffering (*thlipsis* and *pathēma*) and endurance (*hupomonē*) eight times.

Paul does not say that believers will be able to avoid suffering (in fact, he often says just the opposite), but that comfort was available to them *in the midst* of suffering (v. 4).<sup>191</sup> How is there comfort in suffering? The two concepts seem to be antithetical. Most people today think of comfort in terms of “well-being, physical ease, satisfaction, and freedom from pain and anxiety” (“shalom”?),<sup>192</sup> yet suffering seems to be the opposite of these. Garland suggests that Paul’s concept of comfort “is not some tranquilizing dose of grace that only

---

<sup>190</sup> Polhill, *Paul & His Letters*, 257.

<sup>191</sup> Linda L. Belleville, *2 Corinthians*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 5.

<sup>192</sup> Garland, *2 Corinthians*, 60.

dulls pains but a stiffening agent that fortifies one in heart, mind, and soul. Comfort relates to encouragement, help, exhortation. God's comfort strengthens weak knees and sustains sagging spirits so that one faces the troubles of life with unbending resolve and unending assurance."<sup>193</sup> Such comfort fortifies a person to face the inevitable trials of life.

How, then, does Paul's suffering bring comfort to the Corinthians? While many in Corinth evidently thought Paul's suffering made him unfit for apostleship, the opposite was true: his excessive suffering required a "superabundance" of grace in his life that enabled him to "shower divine comfort upon others" (v. 5).<sup>194</sup> God sometimes allows believers to suffer hardships in order that we may be a comfort to others, with *His* comfort! As suffering increases, so does the comfort!<sup>195</sup> Paul, as an apostle, had a unique role of mediating comfort to his converts by means of his afflictions. Rather than disqualifying him from apostleship, suffering actually *qualified* him.<sup>196</sup>

Belleville writes insightfully, "Suffering . . . is a training ground for service to the body of Christ. It equips us so that we can better minister to those who, for the sake of the gospel, are going through trials and hardships. In this way, we mediate God's encouragement."<sup>197</sup> This is part of what it means to be parts of *one* body, *one* Church. Just as we are unified with Christ, we are necessarily unified with one another. Fredrickson further

---

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>195</sup> C. Merrill Proudfoot, "Imitation or Realistic Participation: A Study of Paul's Concept of Suffering with Christ," *Interpretation* 17, no. 2 (April 1963): 142.

<sup>196</sup> Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ*, 95. Gorman writes, "Suffering is for Paul, a chief source of his identity and honor as an apostle." Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross*, 199.

<sup>197</sup> Belleville, *2 Corinthians*, 55.

suggests that this passage is intended to remind the Corinthians of the friendship that exists between them and Paul: shared suffering proves their friendship.<sup>198</sup> It also deepens relationships and helps form the basis for mutual love and concern. Nouwen reminds us, “If we ourselves are unable to suffer, we cannot suffer with others.”<sup>199</sup>

Though it is unclear exactly how the Corinthians were suffering,<sup>200</sup> it is clear that Paul saw his apostolic suffering as benefiting them, both in terms of comfort and for their salvation (v. 6). It was Paul’s own courageous facing of many dangers that had brought the gospel to many parts of the Gentile world; his suffering had been used by God to spread the gospel far and wide, including to the city of Corinth.<sup>201</sup> This aspect, suffering for the gospel, which Paul saw primarily as suffering for the benefit of *Christ*, will be given a close look in the following chapter.

It should be noted that Paul once again connects suffering with *hope*: “Our hope for you is firmly grounded, knowing that as you are sharers of our sufferings, so also you are sharers of our comfort” (v. 7). Part of the comfort received by believers who suffer is the reminder that suffering is temporary and is leading toward an eschatological glory. This is the hope that the Corinthians shared with Paul, that they, as they patiently endured (v. 6; cf. 2 Thess. 1:4), shared in both the present suffering and the future glory to come. This glory, in turn was guaranteed, because of their identification with Christ and His suffering (Rom. 8:17;

---

<sup>198</sup> David E. Fredrickson, “Paul, Hardships, and Suffering,” in *Paul in the Greco-Roman World*, ed. J. Paul Sampley (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 2003), 182.

<sup>199</sup> Nouwen, McNeill, and Morrison, *Compassion*, 92.

<sup>200</sup> Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 10.

<sup>201</sup> Garland, *2 Corinthians*, 67.

see chapter 4). Shared suffering leads to the comfort and encouragement of a shared hope, which in turn increases the sense (and reality) of unity within the body.

There are a number of other passages in Paul that give a similar message of unity and encouragement through shared suffering. Romans 12:12-15 lists numerous exhortations of Paul to believers, including “persevering in tribulation [*thlipsis*]” and “contributing to the needs of the saints.” Sacrificial giving is another way that believers may choose to suffer<sup>202</sup> for the sake of others. He also writes that Christians must “Bless those who persecute [*diokō*] you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep [*klaiō*].” These are important acts of solidarity, standing together in the midst of difficulties as well as in joyful occasions.

At the beginning of his letter to the Philippians, he tells them how thankful he is for them, both because of their “participation<sup>203</sup> in the gospel” (1:5, 7) and because in his imprisonment (*desmon* – “bonds”) they “share in God’s grace” with him.<sup>204</sup> This is similar to his request to the Colossians to “remember” his imprisonment (Col. 4:18). In other words, “support me, pray for me, share this burden with me!” He tells the Philippians to be “united

---

<sup>202</sup> Paradoxically, however, by my definition of suffering, sacrificial giving may be more along the lines of “pain” than suffering, for a gift cheerfully and willingly given may *not* result in mental anguish. Does it follow, then, that God has, by giving us a unified body, made a way for suffering to naturally be diminished? In other words, perhaps suffering in some ways ceases by virtue of being endured on the behalf of another.

<sup>203</sup> Both here and above in 2 Corinthians 1:7, the Greek is *koinōnia*: usually translated “fellowship” or “participation.” This is an important concept in Paul. It is much more than simply “community” or “fellowship” among Christians. Schattenmann writes that for Paul it “refers strictly to the relation of faith to Christ: ‘the fellowship of His Son’ (1 Cor. 1:9), ‘the fellowship of the Holy Spirit’ (2 Cor. 13:13), ‘fellowship in the gospel’ (Phil. 1:5), ‘fellowship of faith’ (Phlm. 6). In each case the object is in the gen. The ‘right hand of fellowship’ (Gal. 2:9) . . . was not just a handshake over a deal but mutual recognition of being in Christ. Similarly, *koinōnia* in 1 Cor. 10:16 means ‘participation’ in the body and blood of Christ and thus union with the exalted Christ.” J. Schattenmann, “κοινωνία,” in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 1, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan; Exeter, U.K.: Paternoster Press, 1986), 643.

<sup>204</sup> Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 23.



in spirit, intent on one purpose,” and “regard one another as more important than yourselves” (Phil. 2:2-3). He illustrates this with the example of Jesus, who emptied himself, became a servant, suffered, and died. Paul also writes that he has learned to be content in all situations, no matter how difficult or prosperous, because of Christ’s strength, yet he adds that he is thankful that the Philippians had shared with him in his afflictions (*thlipsis*, Phil. 4:11-14).

At the end of one of his “catalogues of suffering,” Paul wrote, “Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches. Who is weak without my being weak? Who is led into sin without my intense concern?” (2 Cor. 11:28-29). Here it can be seen again that he is suffering greatly on behalf of the churches. This term he uses translated “intense concern” (*puroō*) literally means “to burn” and was used to speak “of the fiery end of the world.”<sup>205</sup> Paul is “burning” with concern from the unity he has with the Corinthians. He feels deeply every trial they endure and is concerned for them to the point of feeling “daily pressure” upon himself. This is not to say that he simply worries for them, but that he works endlessly to serve them, help them, and ensure their continuance in the faith. He suffers and labours for the sake of the Church.

Similarly, in Ephesians 6:18-20, Paul asks the believers to constantly pray and “be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints.” Earlier, in 4:2-3, he encourages them to tolerate one another in love “with all humility and gentleness . . . being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit. . . .” This idea of “bearing with one another” to keep the unity is also seen in Colossians 3:12-14. Paul wants believers to pay the difficult price of unity by showing real, forgiving love. Beyond this, he knows that those who suffer will be encouraged

---

<sup>205</sup> Bauer et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 731.

by the “longing” and concern shown by the body of believers (2 Cor. 7:6-7; 1 Thess. 3:6-7), especially when separated.

Many people, including Christians, have a difficult time dealing with the suffering of others in an intimate, personal manner. True compassion is more than just feeling sorry for someone and wishing them well; it is sharing their suffering with them so that they do not have to “go at it” alone, so that they are supported and encouraged. If Christians are truly the body of Christ, they will experience genuine anguish when another part – another person – hurts; they will not be able to ignore it, nor will they want to.

The problem, Hall suggests, especially in Western society, is our *incapacity to suffer*. Suffering is a thing we want to avoid at all costs, and when we do face suffering, we are unable to accept it or articulate it. Because of our incapacity to suffer ourselves, we are unable to enter into the suffering of others. Suffering is seen as an enemy, and we want nothing to do with it.<sup>206</sup> We want a quick-fix, a pill, an operation – whatever it takes to avoid suffering. Our whole view of suffering needs to change dramatically; we need to see it as an evil, yes, but also as something that God is using to shape us and mould us into His unified body, a people set apart for Him. Paul is thus demonstrating that God uses the suffering of believers to benefit the Church in terms of unity and encouragement.

### The Benefit of Example

A second benefit God brings out of suffering to the community of believers is that of an *example* for others to follow. This can be seen in 1 Thessalonians 1:6-8:

---

<sup>206</sup> Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 43-45.

You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything.

The visit of Paul and Silas to Thessalonica, in Acts 17, resulted in an uproar. They were sent away by the brethren at night to Berea, where they were followed and persecuted again, resulting in yet another quick escape for Paul, this time to Athens (vv. 5-15). Evidently, after Paul's escape, the resentment was turned against the believers in Thessalonica. First Thessalonians 2:14 says, "For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews. . . ." It is not hard to imagine that those who stirred up two cities because of Paul and his message would similarly attack anyone who believed him and accepted his message. These Christians shared in the common lot of believers, the fellowship of Christ's suffering (cf. Phil. 3:10).<sup>207</sup>

It may surprise some to see the word order in verse 6 being "imitators of *us* and of the *Lord*," but this is likely the historical order. The missionary – Paul – provided his converts an example to follow (cf. 1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1), and then the converts matured to the point of imitating *his* Master (Eph. 5:1).<sup>208</sup> This begs the question each believer must ask: "Is my life and how I deal with adversity an example to others that is worth following?"

---

<sup>207</sup> F. F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, Word Biblical Commentary 45 (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982), 16.

<sup>208</sup> Leon Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, rev. ed., The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 47. It is likewise important to note that Paul's example to the churches was an imitation of what Christ had done for all of them (cf. Phil. 2:5 ff.).

The Thessalonians received the gospel in the midst of “intense” or “severe” persecutions (*thlipsis pollē*). Yet this terrible trial, Paul writes, was received “with the joy of the Holy Spirit”! How was this possible? Joy does not come from suffering itself, but the Holy Spirit produces joy within believers as a fruit of His presence in their lives (Acts 13:52; Rom. 14:17; Gal. 5:22; 1 Pet. 4:13-14). His presence allows believers to overcome their circumstances and even to rejoice when suffering.<sup>209</sup> Suffering is to be expected for the believer (John 16:33), but the joy that comes from God in the midst of grief cannot be taken away by anyone or anything (John 16:22).<sup>210</sup>

The main point here, however, is found in verse 7. The Thessalonian Christians, in imitating the apostles and Jesus in their willing and joyful suffering, “became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.” This word “example” (*typos*) is the basis for our English word “type.” It held the idea of an imprint or a mark left by a blow (such as Jesus suffered from the nails; John 20:25), a figure that had been stamped by a blow, or any image, stamped or not (e.g. Acts 7:43). It is also used figuratively to mean a pattern (Acts 7:44; 1 Cor. 10:6; Heb. 8:5) or an example to be followed (Titus 2:7; 1 Pet. 5:3). This is the only time Paul explicitly refers to a church as a “model” or “pattern” for other believers, and it is significant that he does so in the context of suffering.<sup>211</sup> Yet it was not simply their suffering

---

<sup>209</sup> Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; Leicester, England: Apollos, 2002), 99. This surprising connection between suffering and joy is strong and consistent throughout the Bible, including in Paul. Hafemann, for example, writes, “Paul’s call to suffer as an apostle was not a call to a joyless, second-rate existence marked by having to ‘give up things’ for God. The call to suffer for Paul is not a call to a self-pitying sacrifice, but a call to enter into the joy and glory of Christ and his kingdom.” Scott J. Hafemann, “A Call to Pastoral Suffering: The Need for Recovering Paul’s Model of Ministry in 2 Corinthians,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 4, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 27.

<sup>210</sup> Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 48-49.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, 49-50.

that was an example to follow, but also how they responded to it: with joy and perseverance (2 Thess. 1:4).

Their response was also one of courageous evangelism, as God's word "sounded forth" from them both far and wide across the land. It is one thing to suffer silently, but these believers refused to be intimidated by their circumstances, and, filled with the Holy Spirit, they went forth as a missionary church from the very beginning.<sup>212</sup> In 1 Thessalonians 4:10, Paul says that they were not only practicing love to each other, but "toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia." Their trials led them to rely on God and demonstrate His power and fruit in their lives to all the other believers where they travelled. Green may be correct that the comment in verse 8, "so that we have no need to say anything," indicates that the apostles "did not find it necessary to preach in certain places because of the previous evangelistic efforts of this church."<sup>213</sup>

By the time Paul wrote his second epistle to the Thessalonians, it seems that further encouraging reports had reached him about the condition of that church. He and his companions are thankful "because your faith is greatly enlarged, and the love of each one of you toward one another grows ever greater; therefore, we ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches of God for your perseverance and faith in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure" (2 Thess. 1:3-4). Having prayed that they would "increase and abound in love for one another" (1 Thess. 3:12), he now thanks God for answering this prayer.<sup>214</sup> It seems likely that it is in fact their endurance in suffering that has

---

<sup>212</sup> Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 16.

<sup>213</sup> Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 105.

<sup>214</sup> Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 144.

led to this increase in faith and love. Although “hope” is not mentioned here (as it is with “faith” and “love” in 1 Thess. 1:3), it is apparent in their “perseverance” (2 Thess. 1:4).<sup>215</sup>

The Thessalonian church was spoken of “proudly” by the apostles “among the churches of God” (2 Thess. 1:4), so it is evident that it was not only the evangelistic efforts of the church but also the apostles themselves who spread the word and used the example of this church to encourage other congregations to act likewise. Apparently their example spread to other churches in the region and served its purpose, for in 2 Corinthians 8, Paul uses “the churches of Macedonia” – not just the Thessalonian church – as the example of joy and generosity in the midst of a “great ordeal of affliction” (*pollē dokimē thlipseōs*) and “deep poverty” (*bathous ptōcheia*; v. 2). He then urges the Corinthians to follow this example: “see that you abound in this gracious work also” (v. 7b). Their example of faithful suffering benefited numerous churches throughout the Roman Empire.

In 1 Corinthians 4, Paul speaks of his *own* example and that of the other apostles as being “exhibited” by God, “as men condemned to death,” and “a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men” (v. 9). He follows this with a “catalogue of suffering” in verses 10 to 13, and then exhorts the Corinthians to “be imitators” of him (v. 16) because he has become to them their “father through the gospel” (v. 15). Paul “holds up the apostle’s suffering as the life that is praiseworthy to God and as a paradigm for their own existence. . . . Paul is not defending his idiosyncratic way of living out his Christian calling but presenting the way of the cross as modeled by the apostles.”<sup>216</sup>

---

<sup>215</sup> Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 280.

<sup>216</sup> David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 139.

There are two images in this passage that speak to his suffering being an example for the Corinthians to follow. First, he is an “exhibit” and a “spectacle” – he is on display before the whole universe!<sup>217</sup> His sufferings are not hidden, but open for all to see and imitate. Second, he is their spiritual “father,” an image which he contrasts with their “countless tutors” (*paidagōgous*): slaves who supervised and protected children and were often characterized by the Greeks as stupid and harsh men who carried sticks.<sup>218</sup> Paul was no caretaker, and he carried no stick to use on them! He was the very one who had brought them the gospel, the one to whom they should look for instruction and after whom they should model their lives, just like children imitate their parents. Again, it is significant that this exhortation of imitation is given in the context of suffering.

Even Paul’s own imprisonment, he claimed, had been an example that had caused many believers to “have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear” (Phil. 1:12-14). This passage will be considered more fully in chapter 6, as also it relates to suffering for the sake of the gospel, but here it must be noted that many believers, seeing Paul’s perseverance, joy, and faith even while suffering in prison, were emboldened to share the gospel. His example in affliction served to give them courage; seeing how God sustained Paul helped them to trust God for their own protection and empowering.

How often do we think of suffering in terms of an example for others? How well is the Western Church learning from the example of our brothers and sisters who are faithfully enduring persecution and affliction in other parts of the world? Is their example *wasted*

---

<sup>217</sup> Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 175.

<sup>218</sup> Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 145-146.

because we are not truly unified with them? How can we begin to see faithful endurance as an example to learn from if we avoid those who are suffering?

Suffering “is not to be thought of as evidence that God has forsaken his people, but as evidence that God is with them.”<sup>219</sup> It is part of the common bond and unity believers have with Christ and with each other. God uses it in numerous ways, including as a benefit of an example to others. This serves to encourage them not only to persevere under trials, but also to live in the fullness of His Spirit, being joyful, generous, and loving, and sharing the good news with others.

#### The Benefit of Edification

A third way God uses suffering to benefit the community through believers who are suffering, is in terms of edification – building up the faith of believers. In a sense, this has been touched upon in the last two sections, for the bond of unity and the use of example both serve to edify in a more general sense. However, there are several passages that give a slightly different and more complete picture than the ones already discussed.

Galatians 6:2 says: “Bear one another’s burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ.” This finds its context in the previous verse, which speaks of “spiritual” people restoring those who are caught in sin, while being careful to examine themselves to avoid also being tempted. This “burden” (*baros*) should not be seen as only sin, but as “any oppressive ordeal or hardship that was difficult to bear.”<sup>220</sup> *Baros* is regularly used elsewhere to symbolize suffering (as well as responsibility or even the burden of taxation) so “Paul is

---

<sup>219</sup> Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 197.

<sup>220</sup> Timothy George, *Galatians*, The New American Commentary 30 (n.p.: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1994), 413.



probably thinking of a whole range of illnesses and physical disabilities, of responsibilities borne by slaves or widows, scruples of fellow members . . . and so on.”<sup>221</sup>

In Galatians, Paul is countering the church’s libertine tendencies, and he is clear that mutual concern for one another is the opposite of the libertine lifestyle of living for oneself and one’s own pleasures.<sup>222</sup> All Christians go through difficulties, and God intends that we will share these with each other, instead of living proud, self-sufficient lives. When “afflicted on every side” (2 Cor. 7:5), Paul was comforted by God through Titus (v. 6) and the comfort Titus received from others (v. 7). Christians are to suffer on behalf of other Christians, being selfless and loving, for this fulfills the “law of Christ.” This phrase, *nomos Christou*, is used only twice by Paul (1 Cor. 9:21 uses slightly different phrasing). It seems to reflect Jesus’ summary of God’s moral law in His “new commandment” to “love one another, even as I have loved you” (cf. John 15:12; 1 John 3:23).<sup>223</sup> This is supported by Galatians 5:13-14. By showing true compassion and suffering with others, believers fulfill God’s requirement of love and the body of Christ is built up.

Does Paul contradict himself only three verses later, in Galatians 6:5, by writing, “For each one will bear his own load”? Although he uses the same verb, “bear” (*bastadzō*), he does not use *baros* a second time, but uses *phortion* instead, which normally refers to a regular load and not an excessive burden – figuratively perhaps a “load of inescapable and everyday responsibilities.”<sup>224</sup> Paul apparently expected believers to shoulder the weight and

---

<sup>221</sup> Dunn, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians*, 321.

<sup>222</sup> Longenecker, *Galatians*, 276.

<sup>223</sup> George, *Galatians*, 416.

<sup>224</sup> Dunn, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians*, 326.

be responsible for what they could handle themselves. No one was to take advantage of the mutuality of the community and use it as an excuse to be lazy and irresponsible. This is not loving, nor does it edify anyone. When a person is burdened with more than he or she can reasonably handle (it will vary from person to person), then the community must be there to help. Yet it is only by being in close community with one another that we will be able to discern when *phortion* becomes *baros*, when work becomes affliction.

A similar concept of bearing burdens for the sake of edification is found in Romans 15:1-3. Paul exhorts his readers to “bear the weaknesses [*asthenēmata*] of those without strength” and “please his neighbor for his good, to his edification.” He gives the example of Christ, who did not please Himself, but willingly suffered reproach on behalf of others. There is no idea here of believers bearing sin, but rather helping those who are unable to help themselves, those who are weak (cf. Acts 20:35). Again, when burdens of any sort become too much for someone to bear, believers must support one another,<sup>225</sup> accepting various forms of insults, suffering, or burdens for the sake of building up the ones who need it.

There are numerous other examples of suffering for the sake of the edification of the Church, and 2 Corinthians has several. Paul suffered “much affliction [*thlipsis*] and anguish [*synochē*] of heart” in writing to the Corinthians in order that they might know his love and be spared sorrow (2 Cor. 2:4). He accepted all kinds of hardships (*hypomonē*, *thlipsis*, *anagkē*, *stenochōria*, and so on) in order that no offense would be given and the ministry would not be discredited (6:3-10). Furthermore, he was “glad” to be weak (*astheneō*) in order that they would be strong and “be made complete” (13:9). This has the idea of being made

---

<sup>225</sup> Dunn, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians*, 321.

“perfect,”<sup>226</sup> of being “restored” (originally in the sense of setting broken limbs).<sup>227</sup> Again, Paul suffers in order to build them up. Paul also writes of the Macedonians, who gave generously out of their deep poverty (8:2), and he urges the Corinthians to give out of their abundance (8:12-14), not that *they* would be afflicted, but that there would be *equality* among the believers.

Finally, Paul claimed to be “poured out as a drink offering” for the sake of the faith of the Philippians (Phil. 2:16-17), and he informed the Ephesian church that his tribulations (*thlipsis*) were on their behalf, for their glory (Eph. 3:13). Undoubtedly, Paul suffered greatly in order to bring believers closer to his Lord and Savior, to build them up in the faith, and to ensure their devoted continuance.

### Summary

It has been shown in this chapter that Paul puts great emphasis on the fact that God, being both good and sovereign, uses suffering to build up his Church through unity and encouragement, example, and mutual edification. A few theologians and writers on suffering discuss this corporate benefit of suffering, such as Nouwen, Soelle, Gutiérrez, and Weinandy, though this is primarily in the one area mentioned here of “unity” (or “solidarity”) through mutual suffering. Many writers, including Barry Smith, Carson, and Yancey do not emphasize this at all or do so just in passing. It is also rarely discussed in most philosophical treatments of suffering (e.g. Lewis) or by many who are engaging the “suffering of God”

---

<sup>226</sup> Zodiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary*, 843.

<sup>227</sup> Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 612. See also Mark 1:19 for the verbal usage of repairing nets. These are the only times the word is used in the NT.

question (e.g. Fretheim). Presumably, this reflects our western cultural bias that emphasizes “self” over “community.” So there is profit from the corrective of a more exegetically-driven treatment of suffering.

Although no suffering is easy at the time, the difficulty of enduring it can be mitigated by recognizing the value God is bringing to it, not just for the one suffering, but also for the community surrounding that individual. To see things from that perspective requires a radical trust in and dependence on God. As this is learned, the Holy Spirit empowers believers not only to persevere but also to triumph. His presence in our lives produces hope, joy, and confidence that “evil will not have the final triumph in God’s creation.”<sup>228</sup> Yet Paul demonstrates that even beyond the benefits to the one suffering and these corporate benefits, there is also benefit to Christ.

---

<sup>228</sup> Beker, “Suffering and Triumph,” 118.

## CHAPTER 6

### SUFFERING AS A BENEFIT TO CHRIST

When this age ends and God rewards the saints, it will become apparent that all that was endured was in fact for *Him*. God uses the suffering of the righteous for the benefit of those suffering, and He uses it to benefit His Church, but when all is said and done, the righteous ultimately suffer for their Lord and for His glory. “For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen” (Rom. 11:36).

Paul has a very strong sense of this and often describes his suffering and that of other believers as “for the sake of Christ” (e.g. Phil. 3:7), “for the sake of the gospel” (e.g. 1 Cor. 9:23), “the cause of Christ” (Phil. 1:13), or “for the cross of Christ” (e.g. Gal. 6:12).

Whatever a believer faces, whether painful affliction or the difficult pursuit of righteous living, all must be done in such a way that God is honored (1 Cor. 10:31).<sup>229</sup> As disciples of Christ, believers follow His example in sacrificial living, which in turn brings glory to God. Commenting on 1 Corinthians 10:31, Thiselton writes, “For Paul, as for John, that which most startlingly displays God’s impressive splendor is precisely his self-giving in which the Lord of glory is crucified.”<sup>230</sup>

---

<sup>229</sup> Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 488.

<sup>230</sup> Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, *The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster Press, 2000), 793.

In distinguishing this pattern of explanation from the previous chapter, there is both a linguistic and conceptual basis for the differentiation. Certainly in the larger scheme of things, what is done for the sake of the Church is also done for the sake of Christ. Paul does not make such neat distinctions, but there are differences in the way he speaks of the Church and of Christ in relation to suffering. From a linguistic standpoint, one must ask, what is Paul referring to in context, the Church or Christ? Often he relates suffering to benefiting the Church, while at other times he expresses his delight that Christ is being honored somehow through affliction. Conceptually, there often seems to be a difference in motivation. Who is this suffering *for*? At times Paul makes it clear that it is for Christ he is suffering, but at other times he demonstrates that it is for the benefit of other believers. Similarly, at times he speaks of the impact suffering is having on the Church in general, and at other times his suffering is placed in the context of a sacrifice made for God, in service to Him, to bring glory to Him, and to advance His agenda in this world.

For this last reason, suffering “for the sake of the *gospel*” is included in “suffering as a benefit to Christ” instead of “as a benefit to the Church.” It is out of Paul’s devotion to Christ that he suffers to advance the gospel among the pagans. Certainly the Church also benefits from this, as new believers join its ranks and as believers are encouraged to follow Paul’s example, but Paul calls his evangelistic suffering “the cause of Christ” (Phil. 1:13), and it is clear that this is his primary motivation.<sup>231</sup> Paul is therefore able to understand

---

<sup>231</sup> Besides this, the spread of the gospel in any locale logically takes place *prior* to the establishment of the church, so it is not really for the *church*, per se, but for its establishment – i.e. for Christ. A separate category could have been made, such as “as a benefit to the world,” but Paul so closely relates the gospel to suffering on Christ’s behalf that it seems best to place it under “as a benefit to Christ.” It is important to remember that these are not categories that Paul names, as such, but categories inductively derived from Paul’s writings and from noting the existing patterns. Having said that, it made most sense to do it this way because Paul sees his evangelistic suffering as primarily *for Christ*.

suffering as beneficial not only to the believer and to the Church, but also to his Lord. This benefit of righteous suffering to Christ is seen in terms of the advance of His gospel and also in terms of *service* to Christ and in terms of the *glory* of Christ.

### The Benefit to the Gospel of Christ

The spread of the gospel has come with a great price attached to it in every time and place it has been preached. This is only natural because, as Paul wrote, the true struggle of believers is “against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Eph. 6:12). The demonic forces do everything in their powers to try to stop the saints from preaching the Word of God. Yet Scripture makes it clear that Satan, the “Accuser,” will be overcome and “thrown down . . . because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of [the saints’] testimony, and [the saints] did not love their life even when faced with death” (Rev. 12:11). His strongholds are demolished when Christians courageously, speak forth the truth about Jesus’ death and resurrection, with little thought for their own lives. As Tertullian wrote, “The blood of the martyrs is seed”<sup>232</sup> (or “is the seed of the Church,” as some paraphrase it).

The concept of “gospel” (*euangelion*) is central to Paul’s teaching and theology, and he speaks of it (and its cognates) 84 times. He uses it to refer to both the *content* and the *proclamation* of the good news,<sup>233</sup> and he claimed that as a bond-servant of Christ and as an apostle, he was “set apart for the gospel of God” (Rom. 1:1). His mission in life, in obedience

---

<sup>232</sup> Everett Ferguson, “Tertullian,” in *Eerdmans’ Handbook to the History of Christianity*, ed. Tim Dowley (Hertfordshire, England: Lion Publishing, 1977), 111.

<sup>233</sup> U. Becker, “εὐαγγέλιον,” in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 2, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan; Exeter, U.K.: Paternoster Press, 1986), 111.

to His Lord, was to “do all things for the sake of the gospel” (1 Cor. 9:23), which he related to “the glory of Christ” (2 Cor. 4:4). It was not, therefore, “Paul’s gospel,” but the gospel “of Christ” (Rom. 15:9; 1 Cor. 9:12; 2 Cor. 2:12; 9:13; 10:14; Gal. 1:7; Phil. 1:27; 1 Thess. 3:2). His proclamation of the gospel is not simply an effort to make converts, but it is an act of worship and obedience to his Lord, an act whereby Christ’s plan for the world is given priority.

God chose Paul to be his apostle and ambassador to the nations, yet He “also planned that the gospel would be disseminated through Pauline suffering.”<sup>234</sup> Even while in prison, “where the death penalty hangs ominously over him, Paul explains his suffering as an opportunity to witness as Christ’s apostle.”<sup>235</sup> Suffering, then, is a way in which Paul can advance God’s agenda in this world. He writes in Philippians 1:12-14:

Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel, so that my imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else, and that most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear.

It seems that Paul had received word of the Philippians’ deep concern about his personal well-being, so he desires to put them at ease from the outset of his letter to them (and again at the end: see 4:11, 13, 18). They had been a great support to Paul, both financially and even sharing in his troubles (*thlipsis*; 4:14-16), and perhaps he wants to assure them that they have not wasted their efforts on him.<sup>236</sup> It would be easy for someone in

---

<sup>234</sup> Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God’s Glory in Christ*, 46.

<sup>235</sup> Roetzel, *Paul*, 54.

<sup>236</sup> Moisés Silva, *Philippians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1992), 66.



Paul's situation to seek pity and support from the churches he had helped establish, but none of this is seen with Paul. Instead of drawing attention to himself and his own needs, he focuses the attention upon the progress of the gospel: "the cause of Christ." This is his true mission, and this is where his all-consuming concern lies. He wants the Philippians to understand that rather than his mission being hindered by his imprisonment (*desmon*), it has surprisingly been advanced!<sup>237</sup> Hawthorne writes,

What appeared at first to be the fatal blow to the Christian mission, the arrest of Paul, turned out to be the means of its revitalization, the key to preaching the gospel before governors and kings . . . and their staff personnel. It became evident, therefore, to those in all parts of the residence of the provincial governor of Caesarea . . . and to all outside it . . . that Paul was a prisoner because he was a Christian. . . . Christianity, therefore, gained public notice because of Paul's bonds. His imprisonment produced notoriety as being for Christ . . . and provided extraordinary opportunity for bearing witness to the saving power of Christ in the gospel.<sup>238</sup>

It is important to note that Paul does not suggest that the mission of the gospel had continued to progress *in spite* of the suffering he faced, but rather that his suffering, his imprisonment, had actually been the *cause* of its advancement! Though *men* had sought to impede his ministry, *God*, in His sovereignty, had used Paul's suffering to cause many more to hear the gospel and believe.<sup>239</sup> In a similar vein, he tells the Galatians that it was because of a bodily illness (*astheneia*) that he had preached the gospel to them (Gal. 4:13).<sup>240</sup> Not

---

<sup>237</sup> Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 33-34.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>239</sup> Silva, *Philippians*, 67-68.

<sup>240</sup> Black writes, "Since Paul's entire apostolic ministry was one of travels, the hopes and disappointments involved with his itinerary must have held special significance. In spite of, or better, because of the many frustrations encountered along the way, Paul had a firm conviction that his travel plans were in the Lord's hands. Even the physical problem which stranded him in Galatia proved to be a blessing in disguise: Paul was able to evangelize an otherwise untouched area, thus accomplishing more than he had originally set out to. He learned through that experience that even an illness could be the occasion for preaching, just as later his imprisonment in Caesarea and Rome would work for the dissemination of the gospel." Black, *Paul, Apostle of Weakness*, 82-83.

only has Paul's imprisonment resulted in the gospel being spread through his own witness, but other believers, seeing his courageous response, have likewise become bold in their witnessing of the gospel (see chapter 5), thus extending Christ's mission even further.

His imprisonment is *en Christo* – in Christ.<sup>241</sup> The NIV translates this “I am in chains for Christ,” while the NAS reads “imprisonment in *the cause of Christ*” (emphasis mine in both). O'Brien writes that *en Christo* “indicates not simply that Paul's imprisonment is ‘for Christ's sake’ – and therefore he is not a political or civil wrongdoer; rather it is part of his sharing in Christ's sufferings (cf. 3:10).”<sup>242</sup> Again, Paul emphasizes his solidarity and identification with Christ and His sufferings.<sup>243</sup> That this is connected to the spread of Christ's gospel, then, is entirely understandable.

Paul continues in Philippians 1 to speak of his great joy that the gospel is being spread, regardless of the motives by which this is occurring (vv. 15-18), and that his greatest desire is that Christ be glorified in him, no matter how his trial turns out, either in his living or dying (vv. 19-20).<sup>244</sup> “For Paul, the goal of the gospel's advance overrides all else; thus his

---

<sup>241</sup> “In Christ” is a very significant concept in Paul, and one that has been discussed by many. Gorman writes, “The phrase ‘in Christ [Jesus]’ occurs more than fifty times in the undisputed Pauline letters, while the phrases ‘in the Lord [Jesus/Jesus Christ]’ and ‘in Christ Jesus our Lord’ together appear a total of nearly forty times. Some of these texts refer to what God has done ‘in Christ,’ but the vast majority refer to existence in Christ. The language is not so much mystical as it is spatial: to live within a ‘sphere’ of influence. The precise meaning of the phrase varies from context to context, but to be ‘in Christ’ principally means to be under the influence of Christ's power, especially the power to be conformed to him and his cross, by participation in the life of a community that acknowledges his lordship” (emphasis his). Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross*, 36.

<sup>242</sup> Peter T. O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster Press, 1991), 92.

<sup>243</sup> Silva, *Philippians*, 68.

<sup>244</sup> Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 107.

personal inconveniences, sufferings, and imprisonment serve this end.”<sup>245</sup> If he must suffer, his only wish is that it would somehow be used by God to bring people to Christ, for his consuming desire is to glorify Christ by whatever he does.

This concept is seen frequently in Paul’s writings. Another significant passage is Col. 1:24: “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body, which is the church, in filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions.”

Although these words have often puzzled believers, Dunn suggests that they “are simply an elaboration of the familiar Pauline theme – rejoicing in suffering as a sharing in Christ’s sufferings.”<sup>246</sup> There is a sense in which the sufferings of Christ were incomplete: “Since believers share in Christ’s sufferings, in a sense Christ’s sufferings are incomplete until the last suffering of the last Christian. . . . a total sum of suffering which must be endured before the end comes. . . .”<sup>247</sup> Dunn and others who share this view, such as Moltmann,<sup>248</sup> may be correct, though it seems somewhat unnatural to quantify suffering in such a way. There does appear to be a mystical sense in which Christ and the Church are connected in suffering, as has been mentioned in previous chapters, but is there another way to understand this?

---

<sup>245</sup> O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 86.

<sup>246</sup> Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 486.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid.

<sup>248</sup> Moltmann, for example, writes, “In the ancient church . . . martyrdom was regarded a special charisma. Those who were put to death were considered to have undergone the ‘baptism of blood’ and to have fellowship with Jesus in death. . . . A martyr did not suffer only *for* Christ, his Lord, as a soldier goes to death for his king. His martyrdom was understood as a suffering *with* Christ, and therefore also as the suffering of Christ in him and with him. And because Christ himself suffered in the martyrs, it can be said with Col. 1:24 that the martyrs ‘in their body complete what is lacking in Christ’s affliction for the sake of the church.’” Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 57.

Christ's work was certainly not inadequate, and Paul's suffering in no way assisted Christ in providing *salvation* for humanity. So what was lacking? This could be explained by the suggestion that the *benefit* of Christ's sufferings still needed to be proclaimed to the Gentiles. Nothing was lacking as far as *salvation* in Christ's afflictions, but only in *proclamation*.<sup>249</sup> Paul's special role in salvation was, as a suffering apostle, to take the completed work of Christ and proclaim it to those who had not heard, primarily the Gentiles. His sufferings in this way "are not redemptive but missionary in character."<sup>250</sup>

This is further seen in Paul's desire to suffer rather than allow anything to hinder the advancement of the gospel. In 1 Corinthians 9, he writes that he and his fellow apostles had given up the right to be supported by that congregation and endured "all things" so that they would "cause no hindrance to the gospel of Christ" (v. 12). His very reward, he wrote, was that he could preach the gospel "without charge" (v. 18). He had made himself a "slave to all" so that he might "win more" (v. 19). "To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some. I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it" (vv. 22-23). He saw suffering as benefiting Christ in terms of advancing His work in this world.

Paul and his co-workers had boldly preached to the Thessalonians "amid much opposition [*agōn*]," having "already suffered [*propaschō*] and been mistreated in Philippi" (1 Thess. 2:2). Yet they accepted "labor [*kopos*] and hardship [*mochthos*] . . . working night and day so as not to be a burden to any of you, we proclaimed to you the gospel of God" (1 Thess. 2:9). The Thessalonians, too, had suffered at the hands of their own countrymen after

---

<sup>249</sup> Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ*, 102.

<sup>250</sup> Gärtner, "πάσχω," 724.

receiving the gospel, yet their perseverance and faith in the midst of their persecutions were a “plain indication” that they would “be considered worthy of the kingdom of God” for which they were suffering (*paschō*; 2 Thess. 1:4-5). This suffering imitated the churches in Judea, who suffered at the hands of the Jews. Some of these Jews drove out (*ekdiōkō*<sup>251</sup>) Paul and his co-workers and hindered them from preaching the gospel (1 Thess. 2:14-15), causing Paul to forcefully pronounce their doom: “wrath has come upon them to the utmost” (1 Thess. 2:16). Although Paul resisted anything that blocked his God-given mission of bringing salvation to the Gentiles, he still had such “great sorrow [*lupē*] and unceasing grief [*odunē*]” for the Jews, who rejected the gospel, that he wished himself “accursed, separated from Christ” for their sake, that they might be saved (Rom. 9:1 ff.). Paul was literally willing to endure *anything* in order that Christ’s gospel would be advanced.

Paul also sought others to join him in suffering for the gospel. He strongly urged the saints in Ephesus to pray and petition God constantly, alertly, and with perseverance, for the saints and for him, so that he would boldly preach the gospel, for which he was “an ambassador in chains” (Eph. 6:18-20). “He was aware that divine resources were needed in the spiritual warfare for this ministry that sought to rescue men and women from the devil’s control.”<sup>252</sup> He also told the Philippians to hold Epaphroditus – and men like him – in “high regard; because he came close to death for the work of Christ, risking his life. . .” (Phil. 2:29-30). Those who suffer for the sake of Christ’s gospel are worthy of much honour, though their reward will be little in this lifetime.

---

<sup>251</sup> This term is only found here in the NT; Morris writes “it denotes the extreme in persecution.” Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 84.

<sup>252</sup> Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; Leicester, England: Apollos, 1999), 486.

When Paul knew that his time of missionary service was coming to an end, he “passed the torch” to Timothy to continue the work: “Do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord or of me His prisoner, but join with me in suffering [*sugkakopatheō*] for the gospel according to the power of God” (2 Tim. 1:8). He made it very clear that it was his appointing as “a preacher and an apostle and a teacher” for the sake of the gospel that he was suffering (2 Tim. 1:10-11), even to the point of imprisonment (2 Tim. 2:9). Likewise, he exhorted Timothy to “endure hardship [*kakopatheō*], do the work of an evangelist” (2 Tim. 4:5), for Paul, himself, was “already being poured out as a drink offering” and the time of his “departure” had come (2 Tim. 4:6).

For Paul, the proclamation of Christ’s gospel was his vocational priority, and if that meant suffering, then he was willing to pay that price to obey God’s calling. Schreiner writes,

Paul’s suffering is vital to his mission as the apostle to the Gentiles. 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. . . . An understanding of Pauline theology and the Pauline mission must investigate Pauline suffering. Paul’s life as a missionary was marked by suffering from its inception. God promised him at his call that his mission and suffering would be intertwined (Acts 9:15-16), showing that suffering was central to the Pauline mission.<sup>253</sup>

#### The Benefit to the Service to Christ

Not only did Paul see suffering as an essential aspect of proclaiming Christ’s gospel, but he saw it as a natural part of serving a suffering Lord. Granted, much of *his* personal service was evangelism, so there will naturally be some parallels here with the previous

---

<sup>253</sup> Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God’s Glory in Christ*, 87.

section, but Paul also believed that God used suffering in other service to Himself besides evangelism. As Jesus told His disciples, “Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A slave is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also” (John 15:20). For Paul and other believers to suffer as servants of Christ is to bring meaning and purpose to what might otherwise seem to be senseless suffering.

Paul saw himself as a “slave” or “servant” of Christ (Rom. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; Gal. 1:10; Titus 1:1), whose natural duty it was to serve God, no matter what the personal cost (see Luke 17:7-10). Tuenté writes that in the titular sense that Paul uses it, “*doulos* [slave] is closest in sense to *diakonos*, servant, which is frequently used in Paul’s writings of the apostolic service of witness. . . . But here, as elsewhere, the distinctive thing about the concept of the *doulos* is the subordinate, obligatory and responsible nature of his service in his exclusive relationship to his Lord.”<sup>254</sup> As a dedicated servant of Christ, then, Paul was willing to suffer on His behalf, regardless of what service Christ demanded.

This is seen overtly and separately from the proclamation of the gospel in a few passages, one of which is 2 Corinthians 6:3-10:

giving no cause for offense in anything, so that the ministry will not be discredited, but in everything commending ourselves as servants of God, in much endurance, in afflictions, in hardships, in distresses, in beatings, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in hunger, in purity, in knowledge, in patience, in kindness, in the Holy Spirit, in genuine love, in the word of truth, in the power of God; by the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and the left, by glory and dishonor, by evil report and good report; regarded as deceivers and yet true; as unknown yet well-known, as dying yet behold, we live; as punished yet not put to death, as sorrowful

---

<sup>254</sup> R. Tuenté, “δουλος,” in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 3, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan; Exeter, U.K.: Paternoster Press, 1986), 596.

yet always rejoicing, as poor yet making many rich, as having nothing yet possessing all things.

Paul had just reminded the Corinthians that he and his co-workers were “ambassadors for Christ,” through whom God was making an appeal to them, and he begged them, “on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God” (5:20). He reminded them that Christ became sin so that they all might be righteous (5:21), and he urged them not to receive this “grace of God in vain” (6:1) by rejecting him as God’s ambassador.<sup>255</sup> He denies discrediting the ministry through anything he had done, but rather commends himself and his co-workers as God’s servants, particularly in “much endurance,” which is a mark of apostleship.<sup>256</sup>

Due to the criticisms he had received from the Corinthians, Paul begins on the defensive. It is the accusation of moral shortcomings that he most vigorously denies, such as lying about his travel arrangements (1:12-2:4) or being dishonest in matters relating to money (4:2; 7:2; 12:16-18), for if such accusations were true, it would bring his entire ministry into disrepute and also dishonor God.<sup>257</sup> On the other hand, he accepts criticisms of his inadequacies in presence and speech (10:10; 11:6) and criticisms of his afflictions (4:7-12; 11:23-12:10), for they serve only to demonstrate God’s sufficiency and his own servanthood to God.<sup>258</sup> Yet he insists that he has put nothing before the Corinthians that would lead them astray or dishonor God, and he begins in 6:3 with an “apology” for the way he has acted and for what God has allowed to happen to him. All that he has done, he has

---

<sup>255</sup> Belleville, *2 Corinthians*, 161.

<sup>256</sup> Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 321.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*, 323.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*



done for Christ, and not for his own self-promotion.<sup>259</sup> His real concern is God’s evaluation of his life and ministry, not the opinion of people (1 Cor. 4:2-4).<sup>260</sup>

In verses 4-10, Paul gives some twenty-eight reasons that his ministry should be trusted by the Corinthians and why he and his co-workers have only done what is to be expected of those who are “servants of God” (v. 4).<sup>261</sup> Martin writes, “Paul already considered himself a servant (or minister) of God. He was not out to prove he was a servant; rather, because he is a servant, he can put forth what he does as an example of the power of God (12:9). Through purity and sincerity of motive (5:11-13), and in spite of suffering and persecution (6:4b-11), Paul brings the wealth of the Gospel to the Corinthians.”<sup>262</sup>

Paul begins this “catalogue of suffering” with the general heading of “great endurance” (*hypomonē*), which is not an affliction itself but “a positive quality by which he commends himself.”<sup>263</sup> Simply suffering is not necessarily commendable; it is the *endurance* of such trials that is the mark of one who God is sustaining, thus indicating that he or she is His servant. The nine types of affliction that follow include numerous terms Paul uses throughout his writings to describe righteous suffering, such as *thlipsis*, *anagkē*, *stenochōria*,

---

<sup>259</sup> Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 170.

<sup>260</sup> Garland, *2 Corinthians*, 306.

<sup>261</sup> These can be divided into three groups: eighteen introduced by *en* (in); three introduced by *dia* (through); and seven introduced by *hōs* (as). Belleville further breaks the first group into three sub-groups: “(1) missionary hardships and sufferings (vv. 4-5), (2) ethical virtues (v. 6) and (3) spiritual weaponry (v. 7).” Belleville, *2 Corinthians*, 166.

<sup>262</sup> Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 172.

<sup>263</sup> Garland, *2 Corinthians*, 307.

and *kopos*; the only word here that does not appear in any of his other tribulation catalogues is “tumults” or “riots” (NIV): *akatastasia*.<sup>264</sup>

These are followed by eight “graces in ministry,” which are inferentially associated with the Holy Spirit,<sup>265</sup> and are used by Paul to indicate that his service is based upon God’s work in his life. It is interesting that he begins this section with “purity,” which speaks to his integrity (which was in question), and ends it with “the power of God” which is the very basis of his ministry.

Paul concludes this list with ten antitheses that demonstrate, through contrast, the paradoxical nature of his ministry. Paul is showing the Corinthians that things are not always as they seem. Life comes through death; wealth comes through poverty; glory comes through dishonor. Above all, he might say, *effective, successful ministry comes through suffering*, for when he is weak, then he is strong through God’s sustaining grace and power (2 Cor. 12:9). Martin writes, “The series of examples and opposites in 6:4b-10 conveys the weakness through which he acted in power . . . Paul’s ministry is paradox, but it is the kind of ministry that God accepts.”<sup>266</sup> Similarly, Garland writes:

Paul’s service to God brings much hardship. He has not landed a soft assignment as Christ’s ambassador. A ministry of reconciliation requires that one must go to those who are unreconciled and impenitent, to claim those claimed by Satan, to march boldly into the dens of vice, ignorance, and devilry. It is dangerous work, as Christ’s crucifixion reveals. The demonic powers do not lie down weakly in submission when the gospel is preached. But they rise up and lash out viciously in a desperate attempt to prevent it from taking hold.<sup>267</sup>

---

<sup>264</sup> Belleville, *2 Corinthians*, 166.

<sup>265</sup> Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 322.

<sup>266</sup> Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 187.

<sup>267</sup> Garland, *2 Corinthians*, 307.

The hardships of servanthood are also seen in 2 Cor. 11:22-30, another “catalogue of suffering” which Paul again begins by writing, “Are they servants of Christ? . . . I am more so . . .” (v. 23) and continues by listing many tribulations he has gone through. Here he again connects being a “servant” (*diakonos*) with trials and afflictions, the *marks of servanthood*. Is he saying that suffering is evidence of true servanthood? Does one have to be willing to suffer in order to be an effective servant? What does that say to the kind of service many Christians offer God?

To the Philippians he writes, “For to you it has been granted for Christ’s sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer (*paschō*) for His sake” (1:29), again indicating that *suffering is part of their natural relationship to Christ as His servants*. Schreiner writes, “God has granted believers the gift of both believing on and suffering for Christ . . . The verb *granted* is *echaristhē*, from which we derive our word *grace*. Belief is a gift, granted by his grace, and, surprisingly, so is suffering for his sake.”<sup>268</sup> It seems strange that Paul would consider suffering as something granted or allowed by God in His *grace*, unless we are able to see, as is being suggested in this paper, that Paul understands God to be bringing benefits from suffering that believers may not see *apart* from suffering!

Finally, Paul tells Timothy, “Suffer hardship with me [*sygkakopatheō*], as a good soldier of Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 2:3). Timothy is to work hard for Christ, being willing to suffer, just like a soldier is willing to endure whatever is necessary to obey his commanding officer. He is to give up an ordinary life in order to dedicate himself to pleasing the one he serves (v. 4). Furthermore, Timothy’s servanthood ought to be like that of an athlete who

---

<sup>268</sup> Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God’s Glory in Christ*, 247.

obeys the rules (v. 5) and like a hard-working farmer (v. 6). Obedience, hard work, and dedication are key components of servanthood that naturally result in self-sacrifice and suffering.

It is seen then, that Paul understands sacrificial service, which often results in suffering, to bring benefit to God, who is served by it. Along with this, he sees suffering to be the mark of one who serves Jesus, to be a natural outcome of true dedication to Christ. Being marked as a servant of Christ further reinforces a believer's faith that God is in fact using suffering for a greater good, that there is some kind of meaning and purpose behind it. Such faithful suffering, in turn, brings glory to Christ, as will be explored below.<sup>269</sup>

#### The Benefit to the Glory of Christ

Jesus made it clear that the life of a believer was to be marked by such good living that others would see this and give glory to God (e.g. Mt. 5:16). Paul likewise reminded his churches that since Christ had paid such a great price for their salvation, their natural response should be a life that glorifies Christ, one that brings to honor to Him (1 Cor. 6:20). He frequently wrote of his desire that God would be glorified (e.g. Rom. 16:27; Gal. 1:4; Phil. 4:20; 1 Tim. 1:17). After his beautiful doxology in Romans 11:33-36, his very next emphasis was to exhort believers “therefore . . . to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship” (12:1). Whatever

---

<sup>269</sup> Again, the concepts here are closely related from section to section. The distinction between this, the previous section, and the following section is best understood simply by the terminology Paul uses. Although he indisputably is motivated by bringing Christ glory in all he does, sometimes he refers to his suffering as benefiting Christ in terms of the gospel, other times he refers to it as simply what is expected of a servant, and other times he directly speaks of it as being endured for the very purpose of bringing glory to God. These distinctions are far less important than the underlying concept that Paul sees suffering as very much bringing benefit to his Lord and is in fact endured on His behalf and for His glory.

God's children do, it should be done for His glory (1 Cor. 10:31). Conversely, Paul had nothing but condemnation for those who refuse to give God the glory and honor He deserves (Rom. 1:21).

Paul writes of "the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Cor. 4:4; see also 1 Cor. 2:8; 2 Cor. 8:23; 1 Tim. 4:18), clearly equating "Christ" and "God." What he does for Christ, then, brings glory both to the Father and the Son, and when Paul says something is "for Christ's sake," he is echoing this same truth. He frequently connects this idea of glorifying God to suffering. This can be seen in 1 Corinthians 4:9-13:

For, I think, God has exhibited us apostles last of all, as men condemned to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men. We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are prudent in Christ; we are weak, but you are strong; you are distinguished, but we are without honor. To this present hour we are both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed, and are roughly treated, and are homeless; and we toil, working with our own hands; when we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure; when we are slandered, we try to conciliate; we have become as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things, *even* until now.

It seems that the Corinthians were mistakenly proud of their spiritual status and somewhat embarrassed over Paul's lack of status, wisdom, and eloquence.<sup>270</sup> Having just satirized their superiority, riches, and kingly honor (vv. 7-8), Paul now contrasts their supposed honor with his own life of dishonor. Indeed, he and his fellow apostles are "fools," "weak," and "without honor," all for the sake of Christ (v. 10), that *He* might be honored. Paul's concern is not his *own* glory, nor that of the Corinthians, but that of Christ, and for His sake, he is willing to endure a multitude of afflictions (v. 11-13).

---

<sup>270</sup> Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 175.

In order to drive this point home with the Corinthians, Paul uses the vivid image of the apostles as prisoners of war in a great victory parade (see also 2 Cor. 2:14-16). Thiselton writes:

Paul introduces the metaphor of a great pageant, in which criminals, prisoners, or professional gladiators process to the gladiatorial ring, with the apostles bringing up the rear as those who must fight to the death. . . . The Corinthians have a grandstand view of the gladiators from their tiered seats as spectators. But Paul and other authentic apostles are put in the ring as the spectacle. . . . they bring up the rear as the grand finale of the gladiatorial show: as the drama intensifies, finally the doomed criminals appear who must fight to the death, doomed to die . . . because they cannot win every combat, and their bloodied bodies will weaken until humiliation and death overtake them.<sup>271</sup>

Paul's understanding of apostleship is different than that of the Corinthians, who have a worldly perspective that equates godliness with power and status. "He holds up the apostles' suffering as the life that is praiseworthy to God and as a paradigm for their own existence. . . ." <sup>272</sup> His own weaknesses (v. 10) reflect those of Christ on the cross, in order that the true power of God might be made manifest in him and that their faith would rest in God and not on men (1 Cor. 2:2-5).<sup>273</sup> As in 2 Corinthians 6:7-10, Paul uses numerous antitheses (vv. 10-13) to emphasize the paradoxical nature of his ministry and (in this case) the contrasts between the Corinthians' false honor, the apostles obvious dishonor, and Christ's genuine and deserved honor. This dishonor is heightened again in verse 13 by comparing the apostles to "scum" and "dregs," which Thiselton suggests represents the

---

<sup>271</sup> Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 359-360.

<sup>272</sup> Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 139.

<sup>273</sup> Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 176.

“lowest, strongest, most earthy language” Paul can find: the scrapings from people’s shoes, which were the filthiest of all in an ancient city.<sup>274</sup>

Although “toil, working with our own hands” (v. 12) may seem little like hardship to at first glance, it ought to be recognized that for missionaries this would have been an extra burden of time and effort that could not be put into the mission itself.<sup>275</sup> This may also be related to their hunger, thirst, poor clothing, and homelessness because they chose to work instead of accepting patronage. Additionally, it sets up a contrast with verse 8, another reminder that the apostles were indeed not reigning as kings!<sup>276</sup> There is only One who is worthy of the glory of kingship, and that is Christ, for whose glory they suffered.

In many ways, this list has strong parallels with the Beatitudes,<sup>277</sup> and Paul has a clear didactic purpose in this.<sup>278</sup> Especially in the final three antitheses (vv. 12b-13a), Paul is demonstrating to the Corinthians that they should follow the example of the apostles in the way they respond to difficulties. Which way is that? By blessing, enduring, and making peace, regardless of how they are treated, and all for the sake of Christ.

From the outset of Paul’s ministry, he was told that he would suffer *for the name of Jesus* (Acts 9:15-16). He would suffer both as Christ’s representative and for His glory. Similarly, Paul insists that he is ready, “not only to be bound, but even to die at Jerusalem *for*

---

<sup>274</sup> Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 364-365.

<sup>275</sup> Gorman writes, “Tent-making was normally done by slaves or freedmen recently released from slavery; the artisans worked hard but usually remained poor, and their social status was very low. . . .Some at Corinth, particularly the few but influential wise, powerful, and noble . . . would have viewed Paul as a slave engaged in the most humiliating work and worthy of no respect.” Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul’s Narrative Spirituality of the Cross*, 183.

<sup>276</sup> Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 179.

<sup>277</sup> Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 141.

<sup>278</sup> Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 178.

*the name of the Lord Jesus*” (Acts 21:13; emphasis mine). In Romans 8:35-36, he states his confidence in the love of Christ, even in the presence of great suffering, and he quotes Psalm 44:22: “*For Your sake* we are being put to death all day long; we were considered as sheep to be slaughtered” (emphasis mine). It is on Christ’s behalf and for his honor and glory.

Similarly, even in prison Paul is able to profess his great desire that “Christ will even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death” (Phil. 1:20), and he has counted all things “as loss for the sake of Christ” (Phil. 3:7). In 2 Cor. 12:5-10, he boasts only in his weakness (v. 5), for a thorn in the flesh had been given to him to keep him from exalting himself (v. 7). Who then was he to *exalt*? Christ, for whose glory he chose to be content with weaknesses, insults, distresses, persecutions, and difficulties (v. 10).

Finally, in 2 Cor. 4:4-11, Paul reveals that his purpose in preaching is that Christ’s glory would be revealed (v. 4-6). God has intentionally placed the treasure of the gospel in “earthen vessels” so that it will be obvious to everyone that it is the power of God at work, not that of people (v. 7).<sup>279</sup> Thus God receives the glory and not men. The apostles were “afflicted in every way . . . constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus’ sake . . .” (vv. 8-11). They were willing to suffer so that Christ would be glorified. Hafemann writes,

Paul’s call to suffer as an apostle is the very means by which God makes his love and power known in the world *for the proclamation of his glory*. . . . If Paul’s suffering is the means of God’s self-revelation, then the manifestation of God’s glory is its ultimate goal. Moreover, Paul affirms that whenever God’s people, by trusting in God’s love, power, and promises, endure the same sufferings to which he was called as an apostle, they too manifest the power and glory of God in the midst of their adversity [emphasis his].<sup>280</sup>

---

<sup>279</sup> Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God’s Glory in Christ*, 96.

<sup>280</sup> Hafemann, “A Call to Pastoral Suffering,” 24.



### Summary

It has been demonstrated in this chapter that the Lord, who is both sovereign and good, is able to take the suffering of His children in this fallen world and cause it to bring glory and praise to Him. Even out of the ashes of persecution and despair, He takes the sufferings of the righteous and turns them into means whereby His gospel is proclaimed, He is served, and He receives glory.

Surprisingly, this is not a theme emphasized in most of the “suffering literature.” Weinandy mentions it, as do a few others in passing, but by and large the emphasis of the more pastoral and philosophical treatments is on the benefits to the one suffering, while especially those writing from a “liberation theology” perspective emphasize the “solidarity” of suffering, the corporate benefits, more. Where this theme is seen most regularly is in the commentary literature, which reinforces the value of an exegetical approach to suffering.

Paul has no trouble reconciling a good and sovereign God with the suffering of the righteous because he clearly sees that suffering is rooted in sin, but is used by God to benefit Christians, the Church, and Christ. As the final chapter will explore, this has some very important implications for the lives and ministries of all believers.

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSIONS

Theology cannot avoid the forge of human affliction. More than any other utterance the cry of misery haunts the theologian's mind, rattling reminders of dogma's impotence and the hubris of knowledge. Too personal a reality to elude, too unsettling an encounter to comprehend, the mystery of suffering robs theology of its dry assertion and plunges it deep into the ooze of human experience. There, where fragile persons live and die, theology discovers the question which makes urgent its search for understanding.<sup>281</sup>

The "problem of suffering" is much more than an intellectual quest; it is a critical search for answers that will satisfy in real life, that will succeed in the "ooze of human experience." At some point, each believer must ask, "How will *I* respond to suffering? How will *I* live within this tension of a fallen creation and an emerging kingdom, where affliction and hope freely mingle? Do I trust that God is both good and sovereign in light of the misery I see and experience? Will I trust God to make all things right in His time?" How we answer those questions will entirely shape the effectiveness of our ministry in this world.

#### Summary of Paul's Understanding of Suffering

While this study is not meant to answer all the questions people have on the "why" of human suffering, some significant conclusions can be reached, based on the data presented, and in light of the parameters set. Paul does not set out to explain God's purposes in suffering in a systematic way, nor does he try to defend God for allowing affliction, yet he consistently

---

<sup>281</sup> Karl A. Plank, *Paul and the Irony of Affliction* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1987), 92-93.

teaches and demonstrates that God is not responsible for suffering, but He brings good out of it. In this way, whether consciously or not, Paul proves that his beliefs in God's sovereignty and goodness are in no way contradicted by the suffering of the righteous. He has no affinity for suffering in and of itself, but he is able to rejoice in all circumstances (e.g. Phil. 2:17), knowing that God is working through it all for the greater "good."

It has been shown that Paul sees sin at the root of death and suffering in this world. This does not mean that there is always a *direct* correlation between sin and suffering, but rather that all who live in this fallen world will necessarily experience the effects of a creation marred by sin. Clearly, *some* suffering is the direct result of particular sins, both from "natural" consequences and from "positive" punishments, but since *all* have sinned, everyone deserves to suffer punishment (and death) in a general sense. The *righteous*, more than any, must expect to suffer, because they live in a world that stands in opposition to their God and because they follow a Lord who set the example of suffering. In this fallen world we live in, "shalom" is not attained, but is consistently broken and disturbed by various kinds of afflictions and suffering. "In this day when many in the Western world have been seduced by some form of the 'power, health, and wealth' gospel, it is important to stress the Christian's location – between the fall and the new heaven and the new earth, enjoying the 'downpayment' of the Spirit but by no means free of death and decay."<sup>282</sup>

Though Paul emphasizes the necessity of suffering for the sake of righteousness, he also consistently demonstrates that God causes suffering to result in many *benefits*. There may be numerous ways to categorize these benefits, but when all the data is collected, the

---

<sup>282</sup> Carson, *How Long O Lord?*, 251.

patterns seem to fall naturally into three categories: benefits to the Christian, benefits to the Church, and benefits to Christ. Although exact percentages are impractical for numerous reasons,<sup>283</sup> the data show numerous passages fitting into each category.

The first category, which suggests that Paul sees suffering as benefiting the *Christian* who suffers, is a very common explanation used by theologians, as described in chapter one. Even here, however, many theologians and philosophers, including Barry Smith, Lewis, Carson, and Yancey, primarily emphasize only one aspect of this: *sanctification*. Certainly God uses suffering to make believers more holy, to teach them many lessons, to discipline them, to cause them to rely on Him. What is seldom mentioned is that suffering also causes believers to identify more closely with their Lord, both in a subjective manner and in the mysterious aspect of their union with Christ, and that God uses suffering to increase their hope for future reward.<sup>284</sup> These latter aspects, for the most part, seem to be dealt with rather selectively in much of the “suffering literature.”

A second category of benefits of suffering found in Paul is that of suffering as a benefit to the community of the one suffering, to the *Church*. Though found frequently in Paul, this is not always explicitly engaged by theologians and writers. It is surprisingly mentioned little or not at all in Barry Smith, Carson, and Lewis, while others, such as Soelle, Nouwen, and Gutiérrez engage it significantly. Paul revealed that his suffering, and that of other believers, served to encourage, unify, and build up the Church. When faithfully

---

<sup>283</sup> For example, the importance and significance of some passages is greater than others, some passages contain more terms but less verses (while others contain more verses and less terms), and there is substantial overlap between the categories in many passages. Regardless of any precise pattern of distribution, the point is easily made that Paul’s explanations of suffering fall significantly into each of these three categories, as can easily be seen from the passages explored in the body of this thesis.

<sup>284</sup> Moltmann, unlike the others listed above, emphasizes both union with Christ and hope.

endured, suffering also served as an example for others, giving them courage to face their own trials. As the “body of Christ,” it follows logically that believers would be greatly affected by each other’s afflictions, and the God who can make good come from any of life’s circumstances also brings benefit to the Church through trials.

The final category discussed was that of suffering benefiting *Christ*, which is seldom explicitly engaged, perhaps with the exception of Weinandy (who briefly engages each of these three main patterns to a degree in his chapter “Suffering in the Light of Christ”), but is frequently found in Paul’s epistles. Paul understands his suffering as obedience that results in Christ’s gospel being proclaimed, as is seen especially in his prison epistles. He also sees it as normal service to his Lord: that which is expected of one who would follow a suffering Savior. It is above all his hope and belief that his suffering will also somehow bring glory to God, and for that he is willing to endure much. In the end, all that he goes through is for Christ, for he has given up all else that he might gain Him.

It is interesting that many of the more popular explanations for suffering seen in the more pastoral and philosophical literature on suffering, such as the “free will defense,” are not to be found in Paul. In contrast, Paul has much to say about suffering for Christ’s sake and for the gospel, yet this is largely absent in the popular literature. Are we unconsciously approaching suffering from a human-centered perspective instead of the more God-centered approach of the biblical authors? Are we more concerned with “human freedom” than Paul’s emphasis on enduring suffering for God’s glory? It seems that an exegetical approach results in a much more balanced perspective than may be seen otherwise.

The patterns that emerged from this study also hold some interesting considerations. Appendix 1 contains a chart of the primary suffering terminology Paul uses and its

occurrence in different epistles, and Appendix 2 lists the terms considered for this study and their general meanings as found in Paul. The vast number of these terms is telling, in that they indicate a general saturation of “suffering language” in Paul. It is interesting to observe where these terms fall within the corpus and to observe which epistles have the greatest saturation of suffering language and different terms. For instance, for its size, 2 Timothy contains the most primary suffering words of any of Paul’s epistles, and eight of the eleven primary terms listed, while Titus contains but one primary suffering word total. Could this be explained by a second imprisonment of Paul at the time of writing 2 Timothy? First Corinthians has very few suffering words, whereas 2 Corinthians is pregnant with them. It is easy to see that Paul spends a great deal of effort defending his actions in 2 Corinthians, using “catalogues of suffering” several times to assist in this, so the difference there is in the purpose in writing rather than in the occasion.

It is also interesting that all but four epistles use at least seven *different* primary suffering terms to describe suffering,<sup>285</sup> and suffering is referred to quite frequently in every epistle other than Ephesians and Titus.<sup>286</sup> Obviously, suffering was a critical issue to Paul and the early Church, so it should likewise receive *extensive* consideration from authors today. It is important to ask why so much of the “suffering literature” does not engage Paul’s suffering themes more explicitly and why many “Pauline theologies” do not consider “suffering” to be worthy of separate consideration as a topic in Paul. Why is there this tendency to work in categories that do not always flow naturally from exegetical work?

---

<sup>285</sup> Galatians and Ephesians use only five, and Philemon and Titus each use only one.

<sup>286</sup> Other than these two epistles, every one uses the primary suffering terms at least 9 times. Romans and 1 & 2 Corinthians each use them more than 30 times.

Since Paul scatters these terms over his many epistles and uses them somewhat equally to describe suffering for the sake of the Christian, the Church, and Christ, there is also an indication that he does not see these categories as being entirely separate but rather working together. In other words, although these separate categories can be identified by carefully dissecting Paul's writings, these concepts naturally fall *together* in his writings, and many (or most?) situations of suffering could be described by all three categories and not simply one. It would seem, then, that God is working through suffering for good in multifaceted ways in each and every situation believers find themselves in.

#### Implications for Ministry

There are many practical implications and applications that may be gained from such a study. As Plank expressed so eloquently (above), it is never enough to make dry, theological assertions. What we believe *must* affect how we live; otherwise, we must question whether or not these are truly our beliefs. The following will outline several ways the study at hand can, and perhaps ought to, be applied to the Church and our ministry to the afflicted.

#### Prepare for the Storm

Paul not only expected to suffer, but he also expected every true believer to suffer, as well. As was seen in chapter two, the world, fallen as it is, opposes everything righteous, and Paul was quick to point out that anyone who wants to live righteously for Jesus will naturally be persecuted (2 Tim. 3:12). This has been true from the time of Abel, who was murdered by Cain, and it was exemplified by prophet after prophet who was persecuted for faithfully speaking the Word of God. Likewise, Jesus warned that the world would hate His followers,

for if people persecuted Him, the Master, they would also persecute His servants (John 15:19-20). Peter similarly cautioned believers not to be surprised at “the painful trial” they were suffering, “as though something strange were happening” to them (1 Peter 4:12).

Have we Christians, in the comfort of our Western society, ignored these words? Is that why we are so surprised when trials come our way? Do we assume that they are for others, for people who live in less “free” countries? Have we become so enthralled with this world that we give no offence worth being persecuted for? Even apart from persecution, why do sickness, death, and tragedy seem to take us by surprise, when we can see so plainly that we live in a fallen world?

If suffering is a certainty for believers, what are we doing to prepare people for the inevitable? For we must be prepared; we must ask the difficult questions *before* affliction strikes. It is too late to strengthen the foundation of a home when the storm has struck. This applies not only to affliction *we* must face, but that of others, too. Are we prepared and equipped to deal with the suffering of another? It is doubtful that many are.

One place to start preparing for the “storm” to come is to carefully study the Scriptures for what is really being taught about suffering. This should include looking at Paul, but it should also include reading the Scriptures he studied, to see where a New Testament perspective originates. This must include Job, of course, but there are many other places that need to be mined for this type of material, including the Psalms and all of the Prophets. There is also much in the New Testament besides Paul to consider, especially Jesus’ teaching in the gospels and 1 Peter.

Not only must we study God’s Word, we must teach biblical suffering regularly from the pulpit, in Bible classes, and so on, starting even with curriculum that is developed for



children. Stories from Christian history of martyrs and sacrifice could be used as supplementary material, too.<sup>287</sup> If we are to teach the “whole counsel of God,” we must be willing to emphasize what *God* emphasizes in His Word, and that will necessarily include a theology of suffering. If we wait until difficult times come, it may be too late. Suffering is inevitable, as Paul taught, but good preparation can make us more effective in how we deal with it.

#### Maintain the “Body” as a Model for Care

One of Paul’s most helpful metaphors in considering how the Church ought to deal with the suffering of its members is his concept of the “Body of Christ” (e.g. Rom. 12; 1 Cor. 12; Eph. 4). Since every believer has a physical body that has experienced pains and ailments, it is an easy concept for us to understand and teach in this context. When one part hurts or is weak, the other parts hurt with that part and do what they can to alleviate the pain (1 Cor. 12:26). Similarly, Paul is very concerned that believers care for one another, that they “bear one another’s burdens” (Gal. 2:6). The metaphor of the Church as a “family” was likewise a vital concept to Paul.<sup>288</sup> Functional, loving families look out for one another in all their needs, no matter what the situation. When people suffer, they need people to show that

---

<sup>287</sup> E.g. *Fox’s Book of Martyrs* and *The Martyrs Mirror*. The latter of these was a common book in the homes of many Anabaptists for a long time until quite recently.

<sup>288</sup> Robert Banks, *Paul’s Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in their Cultural Setting* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 56. Gorman also suggests that Paul “experienced community life in Christ as family life, encouraging his fellow believers to understand *ekklēsia* as a surrogate or alternative family, a ‘society of siblings.’” Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul’s Narrative Spirituality of the Cross*, 362.

they care by their presence and by helping with meals, housework, and so on. Love expressed in caring actions will speak to the heart of the afflicted.<sup>289</sup>

It is to our shame that this does not always happen. This is primarily because of at least two factors. First, we may not be as connected to one another, in practice, as the “body” image suggests. We live busy, selfish lives that keep us from forming meaningful relationships, even within the Church. For example, whereas our ancestors may have spent evenings conversing with family, neighbours, and friends, we tend to sit “glued” to our television sets, or we find ourselves rushing from one programmed event to another. Though some of these things may be neutral or even “good” in themselves, they may keep us from the “best”: from true and meaningful involvement in one another’s lives.

Second, when it comes to dealing with suffering, we may be too overwhelmed by both our own difficulties (which we have not learned to deal with adequately) and the sheer volume of suffering we are exposed to. Daily we receive a barrage of news and information about the sufferings of the world around us, yet in spite of knowing more than ever about these, we are able to respond to them less and less.<sup>290</sup> Nouwen writes, “If we let the full content of newscasts enter into our innermost selves, we would be so overwhelmed by the absurdities of existence that we would become paralyzed.”<sup>291</sup> So in order to limit this paralysis, out of self-preservation, we unconsciously develop a habit of closing our ears to

---

<sup>289</sup> Although *koinōnia* may also be considered an important concept for Paul in this regard (also see chapter 5), Banks points out that it has the sense of “participation in some common object or activity . . . not of the sharing of people directly concerned with one another. . . . In his use of *koinōnia*, Paul’s emphasis is upon their participation *alongside* one another in such things, not *in* one another as the term ‘fellowship’ suggests.” Banks, *Paul’s Idea of Community*, 57.

<sup>290</sup> Nouwen, McNeill, and Morrison, *Compassion*, 52.

<sup>291</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

the needs screaming at us, and we become numb to the pain, indifferent. This hurts each one of us, makes it more difficult to enter into true relationships with others, and weakens our witness to the world.

To be the Body of Christ and the family of God in practice, as Paul taught, we must find ways to form true community, to help one another in the difficulties we face. Jesus commanded us to “love one another, just as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:12-13). We need to pray more, care more, love more, and be willing to suffer on behalf of others, as Jesus did, and as Paul both taught and exemplified.

#### Acquire a Language of Lament

Like the psalmists and prophets of old, Paul was certainly not afraid to express his feelings, both to God and to the churches to whom he wrote. He often expressed his frustration and even anguish at the circumstances he found himself in. He *implored* God to remove his “thorn.” He expressed “great sorrow and unceasing grief” in his heart at the plight of his unsaved fellow Jews (Rom. 9:2), and he wrote of the “sorrow upon sorrow” narrowly averted by Epaphroditus’ recovery. The vast array of terms Paul uses to describe suffering has been noted. In the midst great affliction, Paul manages to describe his troubles in no uncertain terms.

In order for people to get over the shock of tragedy or affliction, it is important for them to express their feelings. Soelle writes, “The first step toward overcoming suffering is . . . to find a language that leads out of the uncomprehended suffering that makes one mute, a

language of lament, of crying, of pain, a language that at least says what the situation is.”<sup>292</sup>

This is seen clearly in the Old Testament, as Brueggeman suggests:

The faith of Israel, like all human experiences, moved back and forth between the polar moods of, on the one hand, deep anguish and misery and, on the other hand, profound joy and celebration. In this back and forth movement the people of Israel worked out a pattern of rhetoric that shaped their anguish and brought it to expression so that it could be dealt with. . . . The lament manifests Israel at its best, giving authentic expression to *the real experiences of life* [emphasis his].<sup>293</sup>

Yet many of our churches have discarded the liturgy that contained the language of lament and sorrow.<sup>294</sup> Our songs are often upbeat and celebratory, and we seldom hear sermons on the lament passages in Scripture, in spite of the frequency of their occurrence. Brueggemann suggests that the study of Israel’s laments, “may suggest a corrective to the euphoric, celebrative notions of faith that romantically pretend that life is sweetness and joy, even delight.”<sup>295</sup> Where is there room for expression of sorrow, of frustration, of fear that God has abandoned the one suffering? We must not avoid pain *or* the language of suffering. We must regain some of these methods that our spiritual ancestors found helpful. People need to know that it is acceptable, and often a healthy part of recovery, to voice their complaints, fears, and longings to God.

---

<sup>292</sup> Soelle, *Suffering*, 70.

<sup>293</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, ed. Patrick D. Miller (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 67.

<sup>294</sup> Soelle, *Suffering*, 72.

<sup>295</sup> Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, 67-68. He continues to write, “It may be suggested that the one-sided liturgical renewal of today has, in effect, driven the hurtful side of experience either into obscure corners of faith practice or completely out of Christian worship into various forms of psychotherapy and growth groups.” *Ibid.*, 68.

### Develop a Mature Acceptance of Suffering

Paul provides a good example of how to deal with suffering by the way in which he dealt with his “thorn in the flesh” (2 Cor. 12:7-10). This is seen in at least two ways. First, although Paul taught that suffering was inevitable, he clearly did not *embrace* it. It might be easy, at a glance, to think that Paul was some kind of masochist who simply enjoyed suffering. That might explain why he went through so many trials. However, he did not *want* to suffer, but rather was willing to endure anything in obedience to His Lord. In fact, he prayed fervently for the Lord to take his “thorn” away! Second, when it became clear to Paul that his thorn was going to stay and that God was actually going to use it for good, Paul gladly accepted his “thorn” and the grace that came with it.

Believers must be careful to get both sides of this equation right. There is such a thing as a “premature acceptance” of suffering. This means to simply accept everything that happens as God’s will and to believe that to try to change anything is to fight against God, who has ordained all things. Soelle suggests that premature acceptance of suffering is propagated through “theologically shallow and linguistically impoverished devotional booklets” which result in a thought-world in which “the idea does not surface that one should battle suffering and eliminate its causes.”<sup>296</sup>

On the other side, there often comes a time when all that reasonably *can* be done *has* been done, and it becomes clear that the affliction is within God’s permissive will, that He is using it for His good and sovereign purposes. After significant times of prayer, searching

---

<sup>296</sup> Soelle, *Suffering*, 18.

God's Word, and receiving counsel from other believers (and medical personnel, in the case of an illness), one who is afflicted must come to the place where he or she can accept the situation *as it is*. This does not mean to give up hope in any way, but God often grants a peace "which surpasses all comprehension" (Phil. 4:7). This can be further enriched by understanding some of the many purposes God may have for suffering, including those revealed in this study. Paul prayed for his suffering to be taken away, eventually accepted it as God's will, and continued to trust God for the grace to endure it and for the results He would bring through it.

What does it really mean to allow God to work through our weaknesses? How do we reconcile this with the use of spiritual gifts? We often teach that people should work in the areas of their *gifting*, not in their areas of weakness. Is this correct? Should we counsel believers to minister in their strengths or weaknesses? It seems that God has "wired" people in certain ways so that their gifts, abilities, and desires often coincide to direct them to certain kinds of service. Paul was wired to be an evangelist, and it was his consuming passion to serve in that way. At the same time, he did not shy away from tasks that he knew would cause him grief and expose his weaknesses (e.g. 2 Cor. 10:10; Gal. 4:13-15). He recognized that God was able to work through both his gifts and his weaknesses, yet it was in his weaknesses he boasted, not his gifting (e.g. 2 Cor. 12:5, 9)! Though we may naturally wish to serve according to our gifts and strengths, we also must not shy away from serving God in our areas of weakness, allowing His power to work through us. There is, therefore, a mature acceptance of suffering that includes accepting our weaknesses for what they are in God's sight: opportunities for His sufficiency to be seen in us and His power to be displayed through us.

### Confront Evil Where Possible

Paul demonstrated that there is a time to accept suffering and a time to confront it as evil. We have seen that he taught that the root of suffering is sin, that suffering is, in itself, intrinsically evil. He prayed for the removal of his “thorn.” “Paul is no Stoic who sees the thorn as an opportunity for self-mastery and endurance. Nor is he a theological masochist who glorifies in suffering itself. When suffering hits, Paul prays for deliverance.”<sup>297</sup>

Similarly, Paul told slaves that if they *could* gain their freedom, they *should* (1 Cor. 7:21).<sup>298</sup> While he could see the good that God brought out of suffering, suffering itself was never something to be sought, but an evil that was at times necessary to bear. Jesus constantly confronted sickness and evil, and He healed many people of both physical and spiritual conditions.

There may be times when life as the Body of Christ makes it necessary to confront the causes of suffering. Nouwen insists,

We cannot suffer with the poor when we are unwilling to confront those persons and systems that cause poverty. We cannot set the captives free when we do not want to confront those who carry the keys. We cannot profess our solidarity with those who are oppressed when we are unwilling to confront the oppressor. Compassion without confrontation fades quickly unto fruitless sentimental commiseration.<sup>299</sup>

There are definitely times when believers ought to actively oppose those systems (such as slavery or political regimes), diseases, or circumstances that are at the root of

---

<sup>297</sup> Hafemann, “A Call to Pastoral Suffering,” 30.

<sup>298</sup> Though if unable, they ought to patiently submit to their masters (Eph. 6:5-8). This, too, suggests a “mature acceptance” of suffering.

<sup>299</sup> Nouwen, McNeill, and Morrison, *Compassion*, 124.

affliction. Christ healed diseases and rebuked the religious leaders and lawyers who unnecessarily burdened the people (Lk. 11:46). His followers also ought to have ministries of healing and of removing burdens, as many have had throughout history. “Ultimately Christians will take refuge from their questions about evil not in proud theories that explain evil away, but in combating evil, opposing it, especially evil within themselves but also in the larger world as well.”<sup>300</sup>

It is important, however, to maintain a careful balance in this area, too. In spite of living under an entirely oppressive and corrupt Roman system of government, neither Paul nor Jesus confronted this system or tried to change it. It seems apparent that this was not the mission to which either was called. This is not to say that no one is called to such,<sup>301</sup> but it may be an indication that we must be very careful to discern God’s will in these things before rushing out to “change the world.” If *sin* is the root problem of suffering, it is the *sacrifice of Jesus* alone that can make the real change necessary in the hearts of sinners.<sup>302</sup> For this reason, I believe it is *prayer* (and the resulting proclamation of the gospel) that must be foundational in confronting evil. It may be that such prayer will lead us to take action according to God’s revealed will in our lives.

---

<sup>300</sup> Carson, *How Long O Lord?*, 245-246.

<sup>301</sup> For example, who will argue that William Wilberforce or Martin Luther King, Jr., were disobeying God in the strong stands they took on behalf of slaves? Undoubtedly, there are countless examples of those who stood up for what they knew to be right, and God blessed their actions by changing the hearts of people who could make a change.

<sup>302</sup> Weinandy writes, “The mystery of Jesus, as the incarnate son of God who died for our sins and rose that we might have eternal life, is the Father’s response to the mystery of human suffering.” Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 243.



### Focus on True Hope

It was seen at the end of Chapter 4 that Paul frequently connects “hope” to suffering. He uses the word for hope (*elpis*) approximately 73% of the times it appears in the New Testament.<sup>303</sup> Truly, the suffering apostle was filled with a genuine expectation for better things to come and an expectation that God would supply the grace he and the churches needed to endure from day to day.

It is vital that people who are suffering are offered hope. Who could argue against the value of hope for those attempting to complete an arduous task, such as a marathon, a degree, or the ascent of a mountain? Knowing that something good awaits the completion of a task keeps people going. From a medical perspective, despair has been shown to speed the growth of cancer and increase the rate of death after heart surgery, while hope helps patients fight for their lives and even has a positive correlation with the regression and cure of cancer.<sup>304</sup>

Do we tend to look at things primarily from a temporal standpoint? Could the “hope of glory” (Col. 1:27) be missing from our real beliefs, the beliefs that are witnessed to by the way we live? Could the mental anguish of suffering be alleviated by helping people see the bigger picture of what God is doing in and through suffering and what He is planning for those who love Him? It is not *just* an eschatological hope that believers have, though that is breathtaking to consider, but there is real hope for the *present*, too, when we understand that

---

<sup>303</sup> Paul uses *elpis* 55 times in his epistles. The rest of the NT uses it only 29 times, and 6 of those are quotes of Paul in Acts (Acts 23:6; 24:15; 26:6, 7; 28:20). It appears in each of his epistles except 2 Timothy.

<sup>304</sup> Dwight Carlson and Susan Carlson Wood, *When Life Isn't Fair* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1989), 155.

God is accomplishing His will, in His people and in His world, even (and perhaps *especially*) through the suffering of the righteous.

#### Direct Attention to God

It is rather remarkable to consider that in the midst of all Paul endured, he was able to consistently point to God and say, “I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ . . .” (Phil. 3:8). In reading Paul’s epistles, one cannot help but get a sense that one of Paul’s greatest concerns is that people would know Christ, be drawn to Him, and worship Him with their lives in all circumstances, including suffering. When Paul and Silas were in prison, their response was to pray and sing hymns to God (Acts 16:25)! Similarly, Job’s first reaction to his great ordeal was also to praise God (Job 1:21).

Perhaps righteous suffering needs to be seen as an offering to be given in faithful service to the Most High God.<sup>305</sup> When our attention is on God instead of ourselves, we will discover, as Paul did, that our trials are “momentary” and “light” (2 Cor. 4:17). Instead of simply giving “answers” to those who suffer, we ought to point them to the “Answerer,” who is able to take our suffering and transform it into something good.<sup>306</sup> Not that He will always

---

<sup>305</sup> It is interesting to note the parallels between “giving” and “suffering,” especially using the categories for suffering that I have set out in this thesis. Giving may also be categorized as “a benefit to the Christian” (e.g. the sowing and reaping principle in 2 Cor. 8:6-7), “a benefit to the Church” (which benefits from the gift), and “a benefit to Christ” (to whom the gift is given in worship). This suggests, to me, that the suffering of the righteous may be seen as a type of offering and worship. It may also suggest that these categories may be transferable to other aspects of Christian living and service, which in turn may reinforce the validity of using such categories.

<sup>306</sup> Tyron Inbody, *The Transforming God: An Interpretation of Suffering and Evil* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 163-164.

provide answers – often He does not! Yet it is deeply satisfying and reassuring to know that our questions and doubts are safe with Him and that the results of our sufferings are in His hands. There will always be unanswered questions, and it is an act of giving, of worship, to trust Him with the mysteries that remain. Carson writes,

God is less interested in answering our questions than in other things: securing our alliance, establishing our faith, nurturing a desire for holiness. An important part of spiritual maturity is bound up with this obvious truth. God tells us a great deal about himself; but the mysteries that remain are not going to be answered at a merely theoretical and intellectual level. We may probe a little around the edges, using the minds God has given us to glimpse something of his glory. But ultimately the Christian will take refuge from questions about God not in proud, omniscient explanations but in adoring worship.<sup>307</sup>

#### Questions for Continued Study

A study such as this necessarily brings many additional questions to the surface that cannot be answered within the scope of this study. One such question comes from Douglas Hall and Philip Yancey, who each suggest that there are forms of suffering which may be considered inherently good. Hall argues that “life without any kind of suffering would be no life at all; it would be a form of death. . . . Life . . . depends in some mysterious way upon *the struggle to be*” (emphasis his).<sup>308</sup> Yancey shows that pain is a necessary component to our

---

<sup>307</sup> Carson, *How Long O Lord?*, 245.

<sup>308</sup> Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 60. As examples of this, he suggests four aspects of suffering that humankind would be deficient without: *loneliness*, *limits*, *temptations*, and *anxiety*. Without loneliness, he argues, we would never be able to truly know fellowship with others or love. Without limitations of what we could have, how would we experience wonder, surprise, or gratitude? Without temptations – if humankind were simply programmed to always do the right thing for the right reason – there would be no sense of “right” and “wrong.” Without anxiety, no one could ever experience comfort, relief, or joy! It is the very antithesis of these experiences that allows us to be what we are meant to be. *Ibid.*, 57-59. “What I am contending is that there are, in fact, forms of suffering which belong, in God’s intention, to the human condition. Not all of what we experience as suffering is totally absurd, a mistake, an oversight, or the consequence of sin. There is something about a significant portion of the suffering through which we pass that belongs to the very foundation of being – something without which our human being would not be what it is meant to be.” *Ibid.*, 57.

body's ability to protect itself. Those who cannot feel pain, such as lepers, are ever in danger of life-threatening injuries. Pain causes us to pull our hand away from a hot stove that would otherwise burn us. Further, there is a close association between pain and pleasure: there are no cells dedicated to pleasure, and "even the sensors that produce feelings of sexual pleasure are the same ones that carry messages of alarm."<sup>309</sup>

If there are types of pain, struggle, or suffering that have *inherent* value, what does this suggest for an understanding of humankind prior to the Fall? Does some of this suggest that if the "mental anguish" of suffering is removed, all that remains is pain or struggle, which in itself may not be negative? Does it suggest anything for our future state, that some forms of pain or struggle could exist and yet be entirely good? Paul seems to consistently associate suffering with sin, but are there hints anywhere else in Scripture that there may be forms of pain or suffering which have a less clear association?

Another question suggested by this study deserves extensive further consideration. The languages of suffering in Job, the Psalms, and the Prophets have many similarities to Paul's writings on suffering, especially in the attitude of trust in God's sovereignty and goodness that they each display. There is in Paul, however, as in 1 Peter (another NT source saturated with suffering language), a very clear difference in hope for the future based upon the completed work of Jesus Christ. Considering the fact that much theological work on suffering has been based upon Job, it would be very informative to compare and contrast the teachings on suffering in the Old Testament and the New Testament, especially noting the

---

<sup>309</sup> Philip Yancey, *Where is God When it Hurts?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 51.

difference that Christ's sacrifice has made in the latter.<sup>310</sup> Do the gospels represent an intermediate understanding of both testaments? What role does progressive revelation play in this? When these teachings are integrated with one another, does a bigger picture of suffering emerge, and what does it look like?

Finally, the contemporary discussion on the "suffering of God" needs to continue to be considered through a grid of a solid biblical theology. It is popular today to "solve" the problem of suffering by suggesting that God suffers with His people (e.g. Fretheim): that He voluntarily suffers (Moltmann), has made himself vulnerable (Andrew Park),<sup>311</sup> or is "on the gallows" (Wiesel).<sup>312</sup> Stott suggests, "The best way to confront the traditional view of the impassibility of God . . . is to ask 'what meaning can there be in a love which is not costly to the lover?'"<sup>313</sup> Does it follow that love necessitates vulnerability,<sup>314</sup> or is God so much "Other" that such human categories do not suffice?

There is a danger in constructing a theological grid based upon certain texts of Scripture, such as ones which speak about God's sovereignty and His changelessness, and

---

<sup>310</sup> Weinandy writes, "While God's action within the Old Testament era provided the historical and theological foundation for Jesus' redemptive work, and even anticipated what He himself would accomplish, yet Jesus and his redemptive work radically altered, in the outpouring of the Spirit, humankind's salvific standing. Thus, human suffering can only be properly interpreted and understood from within this new salvific context." Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 215-216.

<sup>311</sup> Inbody, *The Transforming God*, 172.

<sup>312</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>313</sup> Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 332.

<sup>314</sup> Placher, for example, insists, "God suffers because God is vulnerable, and God is vulnerable because God loves – and it is love, not suffering or even vulnerability, that is finally the point. God can help because God acts out of love, and love risks suffering." Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God*, 18. Likewise Moltmann writes, "Were God incapable of suffering in any respect, and therefore in an absolute sense, then he would also be incapable of love." Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 230. Weinandy responds (for example), "God is impassible because his love is perfectly in act ('God is love') and no further self-constituting act could make him more loving. God is absolutely impassible because he is absolutely passionate in his love." Weinandy, "Does God Suffer?"

then using that grid to filter out other texts that speak of God as having emotions and compassion.<sup>315</sup> There is also a danger of doing the opposite. We must be careful not to assume that metaphors about God are meaningless, that they suggest nothing about Him. At the same time, we must recognize that God cannot be fully understood in terms of His creation. Paul sees God as merciful and compassionate, but he does not develop this into an explicit notion that God suffers with His children.<sup>316</sup> How does the Old Testament influence Paul's views, and what would an adequate biblical theology look like in regard to his views on God's compassion?

#### Final Considerations

Certainly there are benefits to the other approaches to the theology of suffering mentioned in this study. There *is* need to pursue the "suffering of God" question and a philosophical "theodicy" that can serve as a Christian apologetic. There is also value in the literature on suffering that has come out of third world countries and places of great oppression, such as those that have a "liberation theology" bias. Each of these has its place and helps us get a fuller view of how God is working in the hearts and minds of His people. They also may cause people to search for answers or reach out to those who need to be helped and comforted.

I question, however, if these ought to be the starting point for a theology of suffering, or if we ought to be carefully developing a biblical-exegetical perspective first. I also wonder

---

<sup>315</sup> Carson, *How Long O Lord?*, 186.

<sup>316</sup> There are, however, hints that Paul saw Christ as sharing in the continuing suffering of the Church. An example of this is Acts 9:4, in which Jesus refers to Paul's persecutions of the church as persecuting *Him*. How this works out in practice is never developed in Paul. See *ibid.*, 189-190.

if some of these other approaches tend to deflect from some of the more salient points of a theology of suffering, such as have been discussed in this paper. For example, does a “free will defense” lead to hope and comfort in the midst of suffering? Does it cause people to see their sufferings as benefiting the Church? Does it help people work together as a community for the elimination and alleviation of suffering? Does conviction of whether or not God suffers increase our confidence that He is working through suffering for an ultimate good? In the end, it is my conviction that writers such as Carson are popular and helpful because they lead people back to the Word of God to answer life’s most difficult questions.

We know that questions about suffering will remain until God finally brings all to completion, but, in the meantime, believers do well to consider how we will respond to suffering when it comes. How *effective* we are as believers in this world will relate closely to how we deal with suffering, not just from a theological standpoint, but especially from an experiential perspective. Stott writes, “The place of suffering in service and of passion in mission is hardly ever taught today. But the greatest single secret of evangelism or missionary effectiveness is the willingness to suffer and die. . . The servant must suffer if he is to bring light to the nations, and the seed must die if it is to multiply.”<sup>317</sup>

This journey through Paul’s epistles has brought to light some significant patterns in Paul’s responses to the suffering of the righteous. These ought to challenge some of the “standard” categories that theologians tend to use, and they provide some critical considerations for how God may be using suffering in the lives of believers. Most of all, in relation to the initial hypothesis, they demonstrate that Paul had little difficulty reconciling

---

<sup>317</sup> Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 322.

his belief of a good and sovereign God with the reality of believers who suffer. Although suffering is evil in and of itself, believers can rejoice that God is using the suffering of the righteous for unimaginable good. He brings value and benefit out of suffering for the one suffering and for the Church, but most importantly of all, Christ Himself is served and glorified, and His gospel is advanced.

When these days of struggle are over, and we hear our Lord say, “Well done,” when we see the nail scars in his hands and the crown of glory upon His head, when we at last sing uninhibited praises to our King, then we will finally know that it was all worthwhile. Until then, may we live faithfully in his love and grace.

To Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen. (Eph. 3:20-21)



APPENDIX 1

PRIMARY SUFFERING TERMS, LOCATIONS, AND FREQUENCY



## APPENDIX 2

### GENERAL SUFFERING TERMS, MEANINGS, AND OCCURENCES

The following list contains the Greek words in Paul considered for this thesis. It also gives their “Strong’s” numbers, basic meanings, and number of occurrences in the Pauline corpus. Notes such as “no usage” or “weak usage” indicate that Paul did not use these words (or very many occurrences of these words), in context, to refer to “suffering” as defined in this thesis. Words emboldened are considered key in both occurrence and strength of usage within Paul’s writings. These “primary terms” are listed in Appendix 1 for their location and frequency in the Pauline corpus.

#### 1. Suffering / Persecution

- **thlibō** (2346) – press upon, oppress, afflict – 8
  - o **thlipsis** (2347) – oppression, affliction, tribulation– 23
- **paschō** (3958) – suffer, endure – 7
  - o **pathēma** (3804) – suffering, affliction, misfortune – 9
  - o **propaschō** (4310) – suffered – 1
  - o **sumpaschō** (4841) – suffer together with – 2
  - o **kakopatheō** (2553) – suffer evil, endure hardship – 3
  - o **sugkakopatheō** (4777) – endure hardship together with someone – 1
- **diokō** (1377) – run after, pursue, persecute – 21
  - o **diogmos** (1375) – persecution – 5
  - o **ekdiokō** (1559) – drive away, persecute severely – 1
- **zēmia** (2209) – loss, damage, detriment – 2
  - o **zēmioō** (2210) – suffer loss – 3

#### 2. Distress / Mourning / Sorrow / Burdening

- **kopos** (2873) – trouble, difficulty, work, labour, toil – 11
  - o **kopiaō** (2872) – become weary, work hard, toil – 14

- **lupē** (3077) – sorrow, pain – 9
  - **lupeō** (3076) – inflict pain – 15
- **baros** (922) – weight, burden – 3
  - **bareō** (916) – to load, burden, weigh down – 3
  - **katabareō** (2599) – to burden – 1
  - **epibareō** (1912) – to burden – 3
- **stenos** (4728) – straight, narrow – 0
  - **stenazō** (4727) – to sigh, groan – 3
  - **stenagmos** (4726) – sigh, groan, groaning – 1
  - **sustenazō** (4959) – to groan together – 1
  - **stenochōreō** (4729) – crowd, cramp, confine, oppress – 2
  - **stenorchōria** (4730) – straits, distress, affliction, difficulty – 4
- **anagkē** (318) – compelling force, distress – 9
  - **anagkazō** (315) – to compel – 4 {weak usage}
- **koptō** (2875) – strike – 0
  - **anakoptō** (348) – hinder – 1 {weak usage}
  - **apokoptō** (609) – to cut off – 1 {weak usage}
  - **egkoptō** (1465) – cut off, hinder – 3
- **klaiō** (2799) – weep – 5
- **ōdin** (5604) – pain of labour – 1
  - **sunōdinō** (4944) – to be in travail together – 1
  - **ōdinō** (5605) – travail in birth – 2
- **phortion** (5413) – load – 1
- **sunechō** (4912) – to press together – 2
  - **sunochē** (4928) – to constrain, fig. distress – 1
- **odunē** (3601) – consuming grief – 2
- **aporeō** (639) – perplexed – 2
  - **exaporeomai** (1820) – to despair – 2
- **penthos** (3997) – grief, sadness, mourning – 0
  - **pentheō** (3996) – be sad, grieve, mourn – 2
- **odurmos** (3602) – mourning – 1
- **katanarkaō** (2655) – to be burdensome – 3 {weak usage}

### 3. Sickness / Weakness / Poverty

- **asthenēs** (772) – without strength, weak – 14
  - **astheneia** (769) – weakness, sickness, disease, timidity – 12
  - **astheneō** (770) – to be powerless, weak – 18
  - **asthenēma** (771) – infirmity – 1
- **ptōchos** (4434) – poor – 4
  - **ptōcheia** (4432) – poverty – 2
  - **ptōcheuō** (4433) – be poor, beg – 1
- **adēmoneō** (85) – to faint – 1
- **eleeinos** (1652) – wretched – 1
- **arrōstos** (732) – sick – 1

- ekluō (1590) – weary, exhausted – 1
- nosos (3554) – sickness, disease – 0
  - noseō (3552) – to be sick – 1 {weak usage }
- adunatos (102) – impotent, weak – 2
- malakos (3120) – soft, effeminate – 1 {no usage }
- ekkakeō (1573) – lose heart, faint – 5 {weak usage }

#### 4. Endure

- **anechō** (430) – to endure, bear, tolerate – 10
  - **anexikakos** (420) – to bear evil, sorrow – 1
- **hupomenō** (5278) – be patient, persevere, endure, be steadfast – 4
  - **hupomonē** (5281) – patience, steadfastness, endurance – 16
- menō (3306) – to remain – 17 {no usage }
  - anamenō (362) – to await – 1 {no usage }
  - diamenō (1265) – abide throughout – 1 {no usage }
  - emmenō (1696) – to endure – 1 {no usage }
  - paramenō (3887) – to endure – 1 {no usage }
- makrothumeō (3114) – be patient, longsuffering – 2 {weak usage }
  - makrothumia (3115) – patience, longsuffering – 10 {weak usage }
- stegō (4722) – bear, endure – 4
- hupopherō (5297) – to bear up, to endure – 3
- talaipōros (5005) – wretched, distress – 1
  - talaipōria (5004) – strenuous work, suffering, hardship – 1
- pherō (5342) – to bear as a burden, bring – 2 {weak usage }
  - hupopherō (5297) – endure – 2
- kartereō (2594) – be strong, steadfast, endure – 0
  - proskartereō (4342) – persist, hold fast – 3 {weak usage }

#### 5. Imprisonment

- **deō** (1210) – bound, imprisoned – 5
  - **desmos** (1199) – bond, tether, imprisonment – 8
  - **desmios** (1198) – prisoner – 5
- doulos (1401) – slave – 31
  - douleia (1397) – slavery – 4
  - douleuō (1398) – be subject, serve – 17
- aichmalōtos (164) – captive, prisoner of war – 0
  - aichmalōsia (161) – captivity – 1 {no }
  - aichmalōteuō (162) – capture, put in prison – 2 {no usage }
  - aichmalōtizō (163) – capture, take captive – 2
  - sunaichmalōtos (4869) – fellow prisoners – 3

6. Conflict

- **agōn** (73) – conflict – 5
  - **agōnizomai** (75) – to fight – 5
- eris (2054) – strife, contention; due to sin – 9 {weak usage}
  - eritheia (2052) – contention, rivalry – 5 {weak usage}
- polemos (4171) – war, battle, strife, conflict, quarrel – 1
- strateuomai (4754) – to wage war, be a soldier – 4
  - strateia (4752) – expedition, campaign – 2
  - stratiōtes (4757) – soldier – 1
  - stratologeō (4758) – gather an army, enlist soldiers – 1
- machomai (3164) – fight, quarrel, dispute – 1 {weak usage}
  - machē (3163) – battle, fighting, quarrels, strife, disputes – 3
  - logomacheō (3055) – strive about words – 1
- paroxunō (3947) – to provoke or rouse – 1 {weak usage}
- erethisō (2042) – to provoke – 2 {weak usage}

7. Discipline

- paideuō (3811) – bring up, train, educate – 5
  - paideia (3809) – upbringing, training, instruction, discipline – 2
  - paideutēs (3810) – instructor, teacher – 1 {no usage}
- dokimazō (1381) – to test, approve, examine, make trial of – 18 {weak usage }

8. Destroy / Kill / Death / Afflict / Trouble / Punish

- thnēskō (2348) – die – 1
  - thanatos (2288) – death – 47
  - thanatoō (2289) – kill – 4
  - apothnēskō (599) – die – 42
  - sunapothnēskō (4880) – die together – 2
- olethros (3639) – destruction, ruin, death – 4
  - olothreutēs (3644) – destroyer – 1
- timōreō (5097) – to punish – 0
  - tinō (5099) – to suffer – 1
- apollumi (622) – destroy – 12
  - apōleia (684) – destruction – 5
- portheō (4199) – to destroy – 2
- phtheirō (5351) – destroy, ruin, corrupt, spoil – 5
  - diaphtheirō (1311) – spoil, destroy, ruin – 2
  - kataphtheirō (2704) – to utterly destroy, depraved – 1
  - phthartos (5349) – corruptible, perishable – 4 {weak usage }
  - phthora (5356) – ruin, destruction, perdition, corruption – 5
- kakos (2556) – bad, wicked – 28
- tarassō (5015) – to stir up, to trouble – 2
- anastatoō (387) – to disturb – 1

- throeō (2360) – to disturb, trouble – 1
- hubris (5196) – injurious treatment, insolence – 1
  - o hubrizō (5195) – treat shamefully, abuse – 1
- mochthos (3449) – labour, exertion, hardship – 3
- kolazō (2849) – to punish – 0
  - o kolaphizō (2852) – torment, mistreat – 2
- tuptō (5180) – to wound, strike – 1
- dikē (1349) – punishment – 1
  - o ekdikeō (1556) – punish – 2
  - o ekdikēsis (1557) – retribution - 3
- epitimaō (2008) – admonish – 1
  - o epitimia (2009) – penalty, punishment – 1
- paroxunō (3947) – provoke – 1
- derō (1194) – hit, beat, flay – 2
- rhabdizō (4463) – to beat with rods – 1
- koimaō (2837) – to sleep, death – 9
- apokteinō (615) – kill, put to death – 5
- pikrainō (4087) – to embitter – 1
- blapsō (984) – to hurt, injure, weaken – 0
  - o blaberos (983) – injurious, harmful – 1 {weak usage }
- analiskō (355) – to consume – 2 {weak }
- kataluō (2647) – tear down, destroy – 3 {weak usage }
- epiplēssō (1969) – to beat, rebuke – 1 {weak usage }
- adikeō (91) – to wrong, hurt – 7 {weak usage }
- hupōpiazō (5299) – mistreat, tire out – 1
- oneidos (3681) – reproach, revile, insult – 0
  - o oneidizō (3679) – reproach, insult – 1
  - o oneidismos (3680) – a reproach, insult – 2

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ahern, Barnabas. "The Fellowship of His Sufferings (Phil 3, 10): A Study of Paul's Doctrine on Christian Suffering." *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 22, no. 1 (January 1960): 1-32.
- Banks, Robert. *Paul's Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in their Cultural Setting*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994.
- Barnett, Paul. *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997.
- Bauer, Walter, William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, and Wilbur F. Gingrich. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Translated and adapted from the fourth revised and augmented edition of Walter Bauer's Griechisch-deutsches Wörterbuch. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979.
- Beck, H., and C. Brown. "εἰρήνη." In *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 2, ed. Colin Brown, 776-783. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan; Exeter, U.K.: Paternoster Press, 1986.
- Becker, Jürgen. *Paul: Apostle to the Gentiles*. Translated by O.C. Dean, Jr. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989.
- Becker, U. "εὐαγγέλιον." In *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 2, ed. Colin Brown, 107-115. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan; Exeter, U.K.: Paternoster Press, 1986.
- Beker, J. Christiaan. *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought*. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1980.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Suffering and Hope: The Biblical Vision and the Human Predicament*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Suffering and Triumph in Paul's Letter to the Romans." *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 7, no. 2 (Dec. 1985): 105-119.



- Belleville, Linda L. *2 Corinthians*. The IVP New Testament Commentary Series. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996.
- Berkhof, Louis. *Systematic Theology*. Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1958.
- Black, David Alan. *Paul, Apostle of Weakness: Astheneia and its Cognates in the Pauline Literature*. New York: P. Lang, 1984.
- Blocher, Henri. "Christian Thought and the Problem of Evil," parts I, II, III, and IV, *Churchman* 99, no. 1 (1985): 6-24, no. 2 (1985): 101-130, no. 3 (1985): 197-215, and no. 4 (1985): 293-316.
- Bloomquist, L. Gregory. *The Function of Suffering in Philippians*. Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series. Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993.
- Bruce, F. F. *1 & 2 Thessalonians*. Word Biblical Commentary 45. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982.
- Brueggemann, Walter. *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*. Edited by Patrick D. Miller. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; n.p.: Paternoster Press, 1977.
- Carlson, Dwight and Susan Carlson Wood. *When Life Isn't Fair*. Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1989.
- Carson, D. A. *How Long O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books; Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1990.
- Carson, D. A., Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris. *An Introduction to the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992.
- Cassell, E. "Recognizing Suffering." *Hastings Center Report* 21 (1991): 24-31. Quoted in Ronald Russell, "Redemptive Suffering and Paul's Thorn in the Flesh." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 39, no. 4 (Dec. 1996): 559-560.
- Committee on Christian Education. *The Westminster Confession of Faith: With a Parallel Modern English Study Version*. Norcross, GA: Great Commission Publications, 1993.
- De Haan, Kurt. *Why Would a Good God Allow Suffering?* Grand Rapids, MI: RBC Ministries, 1999.
- Dunn, James D. G. *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians*. Black's New Testament Commentaries. London: A & C Black, 1993.

- \_\_\_\_\_. "Paul's Theology." In *The Face of New Testament Studies: A Survey of Recent Research*, ed. Scot McKnight and Grant R. Osborne, 326-348. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*. Grand Rapids, Michigan and Cambridge, U.K.: Eerdmans, 1998.
- Ebel, Günther. "διώκω." In *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 2, ed. Colin Brown, 805-807. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan; Exeter, U.K.: Paternoster Press, 1986.
- Erickson, Millard J. *Christian Theology*, 2d ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology*, rev. ed. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001.
- Falkenroth, Ulrich and Colin Brown. "ὑπομένω." In *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 2, ed. Colin Brown, 772-776. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan; Exeter, U.K.: Paternoster Press, 1986.
- Fee, Gordon D. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995.
- Ferguson, Everett. "Tertullian." In *Eerdmans' Handbook to the History of Christianity*, ed. Tim Dowley, 111-112. Hertfordshire, England: Lion Publishing, 1977.
- Fisk, Bruce N. "Paul: Life and Letters." In *The Face of New Testament Studies: A Survey of Recent Research*, ed. Scot McKnight and Grant R. Osborne, 283-325. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004.
- Fitzgerald, John T. *Cracks in an Earthen Vessel: An Examination of the Catalogues of Hardships in the Corinthian Correspondence*. Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1988.
- Fredrickson, David E. "Paul, Hardships, and Suffering." In *Paul in the Greco-Roman World*, ed. J. Paul Sampley, 172-197. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 2003.
- Fretheim, Terence E. *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984.
- Garland, David E. *1 Corinthians*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003.

- \_\_\_\_\_. *2 Corinthians*. The New American Commentary 29. Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1999.
- Gärtner, Burkhard. “πάσχω.” In *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 3, ed. Colin Brown, 719-726. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan; Exeter, U.K.: Paternoster Press, 1986.
- George, Timothy. *Galatians*. The New American Commentary 30. n.p.: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1994.
- Gorman, Michael J. *Cruciformity: Paul’s Narrative Spirituality of the Cross*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001.
- Green, Gene L. *The Letters to the Thessalonians*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; Leicester, England: Apollos, 2002.
- Griffith-Jones, Robin. *The Gospel According to Paul*. N.p.: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004.
- Gutiérrez, Gustavo. *On Job: God-talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*. Translated by Matthew J. O’Connell. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987.
- Haarbeck, Hermann. “κλαίω.” In *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 2, ed. Colin Brown, 416-417. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan; Exeter, U.K.: Paternoster Press, 1986.
- Haarbeck, Hermann and Hans-Goerg Link. “λυπέω.” In *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 2, ed. Colin Brown, 419-421. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan; Exeter, U.K.: Paternoster Press, 1986.
- Hafemann, Scott J. “A Call to Pastoral Suffering: The Need for Recovering Paul’s Model of Ministry in 2 Corinthians.” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 4, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 22-36.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Suffering & Ministry in the Spirit: Paul’s Defense of His Ministry in II Corinthians 2:14-3:3*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990.
- Hall, Douglas John. *God and Human Suffering: An Exercise in the Theology of the Cross*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986.
- Hawthorne, Gerald F. *Philippians*. Word Biblical Commentary 43. Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1983.
- Inbody, Tyron. *The Transforming God: An Interpretation of Suffering and Evil*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997.

- Kushner, Harold S. *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. New York: Avon Books, 1983.
- Lewis, C. S. *The Problem of Pain*, HarperCollins ed. n.p.: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001.
- Link, Hans-Goerg. “ἀσθένεια.” In *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 3, ed. Colin Brown, 993-996. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan; Exeter, U.K.: Paternoster Press, 1986.
- Longenecker, Richard N. *Galatians*. Word Biblical Commentary 41. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1990.
- Martin, Ralph P. *2 Corinthians*. Word Biblical Commentary 40. Waco, TX: Word Books, 1986.
- McGill, Arthur C. “Human Suffering and the Passion of Christ.” In *The Meaning of Human Suffering*, ed. Flavian Dougherty, 159-193. NY: Human Sciences Press, 1982.
- McRay, John. *Paul: His Life and Teaching*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003.
- Moltmann, Jurgen. *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993.
- Moo, Douglas J. *The Epistle to the Romans*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996.
- Morris, Leon. *The Epistle to the Romans*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; Leicester, England: Apollos, 1988.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, rev. ed. The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *New Testament Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Academie Books, 1986.
- Nouwen, Henri J. M., Donald P. McNeill, and Douglas A. Morrison. *Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life*, First Image ed. NY: Doubleday, 1983.
- O’Brien, Peter T. *The Epistle to the Philippians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. The New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster Press, 1991.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Letter to the Ephesians*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; Leicester, England: Apollos, 1999.

- Placher, William C. *Narratives of a Vulnerable God: Christ, Theology, and Scripture*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994.
- Plank, Karl A. *Paul and the Irony of Affliction*. Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1987.
- Pobee, J. S. *Persecution and Martyrdom in the Theology of Paul*. Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series. Sheffield, U.K.: JSOT Press, 1985.
- Polhill, John B. *Paul & His Letters*. Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999.
- Proudfoot, C. Merrill. "Imitation or Realistic Participation: A Study of Paul's Concept of Suffering with Christ." *Interpretation* 17, no. 2 (April 1963): 140-160.
- Roetzel, Calvin J. *Paul*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1998.
- Russell, Ronald. "Redemptive Suffering and Paul's Thorn in the Flesh." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 39, no. 4 (Dec. 1996): 559-570.
- Sampley, J. Paul. "From Text to Thought World: The Route to Paul's Ways." In *Thessalonians, Philippians, Galatians, Philemon*. Pauline Theology 1, ed. Jouette M. Bassler, 3-14. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991.
- Sampley, J. Paul, ed. *Paul in the Greco-Roman World: A Handbook*. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003.
- Sarot, Marcel. "Divine Suffering: Continuity and Discontinuity With the Tradition." *Anglican Theological Review* 78, no. 2 (March 1, 1996): 225-240.
- Schattenmann, J. "κοινωνία." In *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 1, ed. Colin Brown, 639-644. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan; Exeter, U.K.: Paternoster Press, 1986.
- Schippers, Reinier. "θλιψις." In *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 2, ed. Colin Brown, 807-809. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan; Exeter, U.K.: Paternoster Press, 1986.
- Schreiner, Thomas R. *Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; Leicester, England: Apollos, 2001.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Romans*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1998.
- Seitz, M., and H.-G. Link. "κοπος." In *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 1, ed. Colin Brown, 262-263. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan; Exeter, U.K.: Paternoster Press, 1986.

- Sherlock, Charles. *The Doctrine of Humanity*, ed. Gerald Bray. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996.
- Silva, Moisés. *Philippians*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1992.
- Smith, Barry D. *Paul's Seven Explanations of the Suffering of the Righteous*. New York: P. Lang, 2002.
- Soelle, Dorothee. *Suffering*, First Paperback ed. Translated by Everett R. Kalin. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984.
- Sproul, R.C. *Surprised by Suffering*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1989.
- Stott, John R. W. *The Cross of Christ*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986.
- Thiselton, Anthony C. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. The New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster Press, 2000.
- Tuente, R. “δουλος.” In *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 3, ed. Colin Brown, 592-598. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan; Exeter, U.K.: Paternoster Press, 1986.
- Van Hooff, Stan. “The Meanings of Suffering.” *Hastings Center Report* 28, no. 5 (Sept. 1, 1998): 13-19.
- Watson, Duane F. “Paul and Boasting.” In *Paul in the Greco-Roman World*, ed. J. Paul Sampley, 77-100. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 2003.
- Watts, Gary L. *Painful Questions: Facing Struggles with Faith*. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1999.
- Weinandy, Thomas G. *Does God Suffer?* Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000.
- \_\_\_\_\_. “Does God Suffer?” Available from <http://www.arsdisputandi.org/publish/articles/000023/index.html>; Internet; accessed 14 February 2005.
- Yancey, Philip. *Where is God When it Hurts?* Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990.
- Zodhiates, Spiros, ed. *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*, rev. ed. Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 1993.

## PERSONAL VITA

The journey that is my life began (officially) with my birth on October 15, 1967, in Victoria, BC. Raised by Christian parents, I received eternal life when I was about four years old. The rest of my childhood was a battle of my will against what God was trying to accomplish in me. As expected, I lost, and by my high school years, I surrendered to His call on my life, was baptized, and began to pursue a life of ministry.

In 1990, I completed a B.A. in Biblical and Theological Studies at *Briercrest Bible College*, and I was involved in various full-time youth ministry for the next ten years, including a four-year stint with *Youth For Christ*. I married Leanne Suderman in 1996, and we have two children: Benjamin Timothy, born in 1999, and Lorelle Grace, born in 2001.

I have suffered with Crohn's disease since 1987. When Lorelle was diagnosed with the same disease at the age of two, it was very difficult for us. We anxiously prayed for her healing, and I realized that I would gladly suffer *both* diseases if only she could be spared the difficulties I have faced. Undoubtedly, this has affected my choice of thesis topic and my drive to complete the project. Perhaps miraculously, and undoubtedly providentially, Lorelle has been doing extremely well these past few months.

As I graduate this Spring, and the journey continues, I look forward to seeing where God will take us. His grace has brought us this far, and I am more than confident that His grace will sustain us wherever He leads us. May His Name be praised forever.

Craig W. Douglas, March 2005