

PAULINE THEOLOGY OF SUFFERING IN 2 CORINTHIANS 1:3-7 AND ITS RELEVANCE TO CHRISTIANITY TODAY

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Abstract

This paper focuses on Pauline theology of suffering as contained in 2 Corinthians 1:3-7. It investigates the implications of suffering in the life of the contemporary Christians. Pauline writings are full of theological and doctrinal teachings. In looking at the concept of suffering in this text, it is important to relate it to the perception of present day Christians about suffering. Some preachers today try to indoctrinate their members that salvation eliminates suffering in the life of a believer. This teaching is erroneous because Jesus never promised his followers life void of sufferings. Over the ages, Christianity has been faced with severe oppositions and persecutions. The Early Church experienced suffering at its utmost. In today's world, Christians experienced all manner of sufferings. However, this paper discovers that suffering builds the faith of a Christian which enables him/her to counsel those passing through similar experiences. Suffering brings comfort, healing and deliverance. Thus giving believers hope of eternal life.

Keywords: Human suffering, Corinthians, Paul, Theology, Christianity

Introduction

No one in this world can boast of enjoying a life completely free from suffering. That one is a Christian does not exclude the person from suffering. Suffering can be said to be the foundation of Christianity. No human wishes to suffer. It has always being the desire of people to live in comfort and luxury. Suffering is a universal phenomenon. Both the righteous and unrighteous suffer. Jesus on the cross wished the cup passed from him. (Matt. 26:39, Luke 22:42). The master told his followers to "take up the cross and follow him" (Matt. 16:24). The cross is a symbol of suffering. Christ suffered leaving an example for his followers. This does not connote hatred but to work out righteousness in humans. All things work together for good to them who love God. "To this you were called, that

you should follow in his steps” (Heb. 2:10). If there is no suffering, the promise to send us a comforter would have been irrelevant. The truth is that prayer and fasting do not prevent suffering because God tests our faith through suffering. As God who loves mankind dearly, he has also made provision for an antidote to suffering which is endurance and long suffering (Eph. 4:2, Gal. 5:22-23).

In Hall’s words, “suffering is real and it is the lot of humanity as we know it.”¹ In Nigeria, Christians are passing through severe persecutions and untold hardship despite the constant prayers. On daily basis, people lose their lives to terrorists and other forms of sufferings such as natural disasters, sicknesses, famine etc. When people pass through pains, the question has always been: what is responsible for it? Is it the devil or the sin of man? Without the cross, there would be no crown. This shows that suffering is a paradox. Suffering to a Christian brings a good end.

The Concept of Suffering

John Hick in his work on *Evil and the God of Love*, see suffering as a mental state which may be complex as human life.² Suffering is experience of unpleasantness and aversion associated with the perception of harm or threat in an individual. It is a concept prevalent in all religions of the world. In Buddhism, suffering is seen in the following light as presented by Wotogbe Weneka:

All existence is suffering, suffering arises from desire or craving, cessation of desire means end of suffering is achieved by following the eight fold path, controlling the eight fold path, controlling one’s conduct, thinking and belief-right views, right aspiration, right conduct, right speech, right mood of livelihood, right effort, right awareness, right concentration”.³

Buddhism sees all human existence as suffering which emanates from desire. In Islam, suffering is inevitable in the life of every true Muslim. Suffering reveals the hidden self to God. Suffering is built into the fabric of existence so that God may see who truly is righteous. God not only permits the agonies and struggles of life, but has a purpose for them. Suffering opens up the soul and reveals it to God. God uses suffering to look within humans and tests characters and corrects the unbelievers.

¹ J.D. Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986), 75

² John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, Great Britain: Macmillan and co ltd, 1966), 354

³ W.O. Wotogbe-Weneka, *Themes in Comparative Religion*, Port Harcourt: Stephen Printing).

Suffering in Judaism is believed to be sent by God to punish the guilty (retributive justice). Suffering and evil are used by God to punish offenders. God is the source of evil in Judaism. He sends evil Spirit to possess Saul in the Old Testament when he sinned against him.⁴ Jesus refuted this assertion that suffering is a punishment for sin. This is clearly reflected in Luke 1:3, 2-4. Those suffering are not greater sinners than others. Jesus dismisses the Jewish belief that accident or human suffering is God's judgment on sinners. The Bible gives answers to questions people have raised concerning suffering. God is all powerful God who can wipe out suffering entirely if he so wishes. He alone knows why he allows it. That God allows evil and suffering does not change him. "The Lord is good and his mercy endures forever" (Psalm 100:5). God can allow suffering in the life of his loved one for the purpose of chastisement and discipline. Not in all cases that suffering is for the reason of chastisement. Suffering exists, like life and death, good and evil exist.

Scholars are of the opinion that the devil is the source of suffering. In Gen. 3, the serpent beguiled Eve to eat of the tree that God forbade man to eat from. The singular act of disobedience brought curse upon human kind. One can deduce from this story that disobedience brings about suffering. Darrell L. Bock⁵ posits that the woman who was crippled for 18 years was a daughter of Abraham which suggests that she was of the Jewish faith, yet was bound by Satan (Luke 13:11-16).

Man in his free volition chose to rebel against God's instructions. Consequently, this brought suffering to human kind. We cannot exonerate man from being the source of suffering. Some cities in the Bible got destroyed as a result of sin. Sodom and Gomorrah was destroyed as a result of sin. Human suffering is as a result of one's own sin, or the result of someone else's sin or indirectly as a result of living in a fallen world.

The Sufferings of Christ

Jesus suffered during His entire life. His whole life was a life of suffering. The way of obedience was for him at the same time a way of suffering. He suffered from the expected assaults of Satan from the hatred and unbelief of his own people and from the persecution of his enemies. The suffering of Christ was consecrated suffering, increasing in severity as he approached the end. The suffering that began in the incarnation finally reached its climax in the Passion Week during the end of his life. Then all the wrath of God against

⁴ Joseph Omeregbe, *A Philosophical Look at Religion*, Ikeja, Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publishers, 1993), 154

⁵ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke, Vol. 2*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 1996), 1219

sin bore down upon him.⁶ Christ suffered in the flesh and soul. He passed through the anguish of human sinfulness and in both flesh and soul had borne the punishment. Christ took the place of sinners and as a result had to face sufferings in place of law. He was burdened by the sins of his contemporaries.

The temptations of Christ formed an integral part of His sufferings. He was tempted from the beginning of His ministry to the end. In all these temptations, Christ sinned not. Berkhof⁷ opines that it was only by entering into the very trials of men, into their temptations, that Jesus could become a truly sympathetic high priest and attain to the heights of a proved and triumphant perfection. The Bible tells us in Heb. 5:8, that Jesus though without sin learned obedience through what he suffered and was made perfect through suffering (Heb. 2:10). Christ is our perfect example. Therefore, Christians are expected to pass through suffering and come out stronger and better.

Historical and Contextual Background of 2 Corinthians

The Corinthian Church was a very special Church to Paul. Paul made strong efforts in ensuring that the Church which he planted did not die. False teachers had invaded the Church with erroneous teachings which led Paul to writing this second letter in order to save the Church of God from heresy and its associated apostasy. The intruders questioned Paul's integrity and apostolic credentials. In Chapters 1 to 7, Paul dismissed these allegations made against him. He challenged the Church to consider carefully his personal life and ministry as it was revealed in their midst.

According to the New Bible Dictionary, Corinth which Paul evangelized in c.AD 50 was a relatively new city. The city was a centre of cult prostitution in honour of the goddess, Aphrodite. Corinth was inhabited by Jews (Acts 18:4).⁸ The Corinthian Church was a problematic Church. They had problem shaking off the ways they lived before they embraced Christ. They were bringing the world into the Church. The city of Corinth was a commercial city full of life, trade and commerce. Corinth was also a wealthy city. The city was also known for its immoral living. Corinth was a flourishing centre of trade, as well as of industry, particularly ceramics.

⁶ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, (Pennsylvania, USA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1958), 336-337

⁷Berkhof, 1958, 338.

⁸New Bible Dictionary, 3rd ed., (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1996), 225.

Authorship

Paul is undoubtedly the author of 2 Corinthians. He maintained the same style of writing in 1 and 2 Corinthians. Paul was born into Tarsus. This makes him a Roman citizen. He was a Hebrew of the tribe of Benjamin. He studied law under the Jewish rabbi, Gamaliel.

According to an online source, TGC Course on Introduction to 2 Corinthians, second Corinthians is actually the fourth letter that Paul sent to the Church he founded in Corinth, together with the house Churches in the whole province of Achaia, of which Corinth was the capital (2Cor. 1:1; 11:10).⁹

Place of Writing and Date

This letter was written to the Church while Paul was in Macedonia around AD 55. He sent the letter on ahead of him with Titus but arrived shortly after the letter arrived.¹⁰

Literary Structure of 2 Corinthians 1-5

- 1. Paul's Explanation of his Ministry**
 - a. Suffering but not defeated (1)
 - b. Sorrowing but not Despairing (2)
 - c. Spiritual but not Carnal (3)
 - d. Sincere not deceitful (4)
 - e. Serious, not Careless (5)

- 2. Paul's Exhortation to the Church (6-9)**
 - a. Paul's ministry examined (6:1-13)
 - b. Separation from sin (6:14-7:1)
 - c. Paul request reconciliation in the Lord (7:2-16).
 - d. Paul asks for co-operation in the offering (8-9)
 - e. Paul's vindication of his apostleship (10-13)

- 3. Paul's Vindication of his Apostleship**
 - a. Paul defends his manner (10)
 - b. Paul explains his motives (11)
 - c. Paul asserts his merits (12)
 - d. Paul tells his mission (13)

⁹ TGC Course, Introduction to 2 Corinthians, Retrieved from <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/course/2corinthians/> on 11 Oct., 2022.s

¹⁰ D. McCain, *Notes on New Testament Introduction*, (Bukuru, Jos: African Christian Textbooks, 1996), 226.

According to Wiersbe¹¹, the first seven chapters dwell on Paul's ministry in relationship with the Corinthians and generally as it reflects the paradoxes that mark the ministry of Christ's servant.

Suffering in 2 Corinthians 1:3-7

Paul enjoins those passing through suffering to find strength in God. "Why must the righteous suffer?" This question runs from Job to Revelation. Suffering makes the believer to become stronger and gain experience to counsel those passing through similar experiences. Suffering brings comfort, healing and deliverance. Thus giving believers hope of eternal life.

Verse 3: Paul started with a benediction. Peter Orr notes that Paul begins by blessing God to model for the Corinthians from the very beginning a Christian response to suffering. God is referred to as the God of comfort and father of our Lord Jesus Christ. "This thanksgiving for his late deliverance forms a suitable introduction for conciliating their favorable reception of his reasons for not having fulfilled his promise of visiting them."¹²

God is referred to as the 'Father of mercies'—that is, the source of all mercies. Comfort is a virtue that flows from His "mercies". Like a true man of faith, Paul mentions "mercies" and "comfort," before he proceeds to speak of *afflictions* (2Co 1:4–6). The tribulation of believers is not inconsistent with God's mercy, and does not beget in them suspicion of it. In the end of afflictions, they feel that He is "the God of all comfort," that is, who imparts the only true and perfect comfort in every instance.

Trouble **is** derived from the Greek word *thlipsei*, "pressures, distresses" and is mentioned nine times by Paul in this letter. Sometimes the word is translated "troubles," other times "hardships". Paul also used the corresponding verb *thlibō* three times in this epistle. *Distressed* is used in 1:6; *hard-pressed* is used in 4:8; and harassed in 7:5. Troubles are experienced by all Christians. Apostle Paul probably endured more pressures than nearly all his readers. Troubles, Paul said, help Christians shift their perspective from the external and temporal to the internal and eternal.

The word "comfort" is used ten times in vv. 1–7, "consolation" in 5, 6, and 7 and literally means to call to one's side. It is the same word Jesus used in John 14:16 for the Spirit, the

¹¹ W. W. , Wiersbe, *Wiersbe's Expository Outlines on the New Testament*. (Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1997), S. 372

¹² Peter Orr, *The Comfort of God and the Pastoral Ministry*. An Exegetical Study of 2 Corinthians in "Tend my Sheep" (London: Latimer Trust, 2016) 61-78

Comforter (Paraclete). What a joy it is to know that God stands at our side to help whenever we go through troubles. Each member of the Trinity is a comforter: the Father (2 Cor. 1:3), and the Son and Spirit. God is the God of all comfort, just as He is the God of all grace. There is comfort and grace for every situation.

The source of all comfort in the midst of troubles is God Himself, to whom Paul gave three titles: the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion, and the God of all comfort. This same God had sustained Paul through his suffering (2 Cor. 1:8-9) and delivered him from it. "Compassion" translates the Greek *oiktirmōn*, used only four other times in the New Testament rendered "mercy" in Rom. 12:1 and Heb. 10:28, and "compassion" in Phil. 2:1 and Col. 3:12. Just as spiritual gifts are not intended solely for the recipients' benefit but are to be used in turn for the service of others, so comfort received from God enables believers to comfort others. The comfort of God is channeled through people and by means of prayer (1:11). (Paul used a form of "comfort" five times in the Greek, four are translated in the NIV in vv. 3-4, and five more times in vv. 5-7.¹³

Verse 4: The New King James Version reads "...who comforts us in all our tribulation that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God." The apostle lived, not to himself, but to the Church; so, whatever graces God conferred on him, he considered granted not for himself alone, but that he might have the greater ability to help others. So participation in all the afflictions of man peculiarly qualified Jesus to be man's comforter in all his various afflictions.

God comforts us in all afflictions to help us comfort others through our own experience. Comfort goes with affliction. God of comfort comforts us to comfort others. It is necessary to find out what affliction means in this context. Affliction here connotes external tribulation and internal distress¹⁴. In chapter 11, Paul lists afflictions or troubles that he has experienced: imprisonments, beatings, near death experience, lashes, hardship, thirst, hunger and other discomforts. Paul was in every way afflicted. Peter Orr says that external distress produces internal anguish and God is able to comfort the believer in both... every Christian has the obligation to comfort those who are in distress.¹⁵

¹³ John F. Walvoord, ; Zuck, Roy B. ; Dallas Theological Seminary: *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1985, S. 2:554

¹⁴ W. W. , Wiersbe, *Wiersbe's Expository Outlines on the New Testament*. (Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1997), S. 372

¹⁵ Peter Orr, *The Comfort of God and the Pastoral Ministry*. An Exegetical Study of 2 Corinthians in "Tend my Sheep" (London: Latimer Trust, 2016) 61-78

Verse 5: for Paul “the sufferings of Christ” perhaps differed from human suffering in general not by their nature but by the person of the sufferer and the purpose of the suffering. Suffering stands in contrast with “salvation” (2Corinthians 1:6) while tribulation (distress of mind) is in contrast with comfort or consolation. Christ calls His people’s sufferings His own suffering: (1) because of the sympathy and mystical union between Him and us (Ro 8:17; 1Co 4:10); (2) They are borne for His sake; (3) They tend to His glory (Eph 4:1; 1Pe 4:14, 16). “Even so through Christ aboundeth also our comfort.” The *sufferings* (plural) are many; but the *consolation* (though singular) swallows up them all. Comfort preponderates in this Epistle above that in the first Epistle, as now by the effect of the latter most of the Corinthians had been much impressed.¹⁶

The sufferings Paul experienced were a consequence of his relationship to Christ. As Paul continued to preach the gospel, he suffered at the hands of men and from privations which were a part of his task (11:27). But Paul’s sufferings for Christ were accompanied by a comfort that overflowed.

In referring to the sufferings of Christ (1:5), sufferings we suffer (v. 6), and our sufferings (v. 7), the apostle probably had in mind either the suffering he experienced in Asia which he referred to next (v. 8) or the pain brought to him by the problems of the Corinthian church. Both kinds may be in mind, but if it was primarily the latter to whom he referred, then the Corinthians’ own suffering was similar. Paul’s severe letter (7:8) produced in them a profound sorrow as they understood how their reprehensible behavior had grieved Paul (7:9). It had certainly distressed him to write it (2:4) but he did it out of love for them, for their comfort and salvation. The aspect of salvation suggested here is their advance in sanctification, which in fact this letter produced. The Corinthians’ response brought comfort to both themselves and Paul (7:13) and reaffirmed Paul’s hope (1:7) that God indeed had His hand on their lives. In addition, the Corinthians’ comfort produced in them patient endurance (*hypomonē*), steadfastness in the face of unpleasant circumstances.¹⁷

Verse 6: Paul says in this verse “Now if we are afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation, which is effective for enduring the same sufferings which we also suffer. Or if we comforted, it is for your consolation and salvation.” This is exemplifying the communion of saints. Their hearts were, so to speak, mirrors reflecting the likenesses of each other. Alike the afflictions and the consolations of the apostle tend, as in him so in

¹⁶ Walvoord, John F. ; Zuck, Roy B. ; Dallas Theological Seminary: *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures*. (Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1985), S. 2:554

¹⁷ Walvoord, John F. ; Zuck, Roy B. ; Dallas Theological Seminary: *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures*. (Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1985), S. 2:554

them, as having communion with him, to their consolation (2Co 1:4; 4:15). The *Greek* for “afflicted” is the same as before, and ought to be translated, “Whether we *be in tribulation*.” Which is effectual—literally, “works effectually” in enabling you to endure “the same sufferings which we also suffer.”

The Christian undergoes sufferings sometimes for the benefit of others. Paul says, if we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation. The comfort of the apostle also produces the comfort of others. But this comfort that we receive from God is not simply for our personal relief; it is shared with us that we might be able to help others. Paul went through tribulation that he might be able to minister to others. We cannot lead others where we have not been ourselves. Paul looked upon his trials as “the sufferings of Christ” (1:5 and 4:10–11); as he states in Phil. 3:10, he was experiencing the “fellowship of His sufferings.” This does not mean that we share in the sufferings of Christ to atone for our sin, since that was a ministry He alone could perform. Rather, it suggests that we suffer for His sake and for His glory, and that He suffers with us (Acts 9:4).¹⁸

7. “And our hope for you is steadfast, because we know that as you are partakers of the sufferings, so also you will partake of the consolation.” He means, there *is* a community of consolation, as of suffering, between me and you.¹⁹ As the trials abound, the comfort of God abounds as well! Where sin abounds, so does grace (Rom. 5:20). Paul used this word “abound” often in 2 Corinthians. In v. 6 Paul teaches the wonderful truth that a Christian’s affliction brings a double blessing: first, to the individual believer (“effectual” means that it works in the believer), and then to others. Christians ought to be willing to endure trials, since we know they bring spiritual good to us personally and blessings to others as we share God’s comfort with them. The Greek word for “partakers” in v. 7 can also mean “fellowship” or “partners.” We ought to be willing “partners” with Christ in suffering since this “partnership” leads to comfort and edification.²⁰

Implications of Suffering to the Contemporary Christian

Suffering is inevitable in the life of every Christian. Nobody can escape from it. Some Christians are misled to believe that suffering is not meant for a prayerful Christian and one who sows seeds. In Nigeria, there is a popular song in *pidgin English* sang in some Churches “*me I no go suffer, I no go beg for bread, Lord of miracle na my papa o*” which

¹⁸ W. W. Wiersbe, *Wiersbe's Expository Outlines on the New Testament*. (Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1997), S. 372

¹⁹ R. Jamieson ; Fausset, A. R. ; Brown, David: *A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments*. Oak Harbor, WA : Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997, S. 2 Co 1:3

²⁰ W. W. Wiersbe, 1997, S. 372

means (I will not suffer, I will not beg for bread, God of miracle is my father). This song is a mere wishful thinking. Prophetic declarations and Christian songs do not prevent or avert suffering because suffering is the way of Christ.

God allowed the Early Christians to undergo sufferings even to death. Jesus himself was humiliated and nailed to the cross with criminals. God did not stop this because it was meant for the salvation of humans. Stephen and the apostles of Jesus Christ were persecuted and killed. The persecution of the Early Church led to the spread of the gospel because wherever Christians fled to, they moved on with the preaching of the gospel.

The Positive Results of Suffering are:

1. Suffering makes us human: suffering connects us to fate of those who came before us and the people who will come after us. Suffering portrays our human frailty. To be human is ideally to suffer because the world is not a bed of roses or a place of perfection.
2. Suffering helps us to appreciate the moments of comfort: life is better when you win the battle if there were no pains in wrestling or running a race, there will be no joy in winning. The greatest happiness is found within suffering. God uses suffering to build the faith of his children. Grudem²¹ says that we should see all the hardship and sufferings that come to us in life as something that God brings to us to do good, strengthening our trust in him and our obedience, ultimately increasing our ability to glorify God.

Conclusion

Paul's concept of suffering reveals that there is hope of salvation for those who go through suffering. The Bible assures them of comfort, through the comfort received, others are comforted and this produces a chain reaction of comfort. The suffering of the righteous has a spiritual value just like the case of the Early Christians who gave their lives for the sake of the gospel. Their blood was the seed of the gospel. The faithfulness and discipline of a believer is sure to attract persecution both in the Church and in the society. Suffering cannot be divorced from the salvation mandate of God. The suffering and death of Christ is what produced Christianity. The Church today preaches less on Suffering. Most Christians however has shallow knowledge about suffering because of the general notion that when one is converted, everything becomes rosy. Therefore, when suffering comes, such Christians become despondent. Christians should preach more the

²¹ Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine: Essential Teachings of Christian Faith*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999), 349

message of the cross than the popular prosperity messages that bring about multiplication of members in the Church and not multiplication of souls in the kingdom.

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