

LESSONS ON SUFFERING FROM 2 CORINTHIANS

James O'Brien

James O'Brien is an Australian, lecturing at the Christian Leaders' Training College. He completed a Bachelor of Ministries at the Bible College of Victoria. The following article was written as part of a Master's programme.

Introduction

During his life as an apostle, Paul was no stranger to suffering, and this is reflected in his writings. He speaks of affliction and suffering over 60 times,¹ and, at times, gives detailed lists of these sufferings. Paul suffered often, and from various afflictions and trials. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, Paul's writings reveal a positive attitude to suffering, and this will be examined more fully later in the essay.

Like Paul, the people of Melanesia² experience a great deal of suffering. This results from poverty, malnutrition and poor health care, variations in climate, tribal conflict, sorcery, lawlessness, and a number of other factors. Unlike Paul, the response to this suffering is generally far from positive. To a Melanesian, suffering is usually seen as punishment for some wrongdoing,³ and, often, this is seen in terms of a breakdown in relations between persons, or the breaking of a taboo.⁴ This

¹ S. J. Hafemann, "Suffering", in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, G. F. Hawthorne, R. P. Martin, and D. G. Reid, eds, Downers Grove IL: IVP, 1993, p. 919.

² For the purpose of this essay, the "people of Melanesia" refers, primarily, to the people of Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands.

³ G. Teske, "Worship the Father in Spirit and Truth", in Wendy Flannery, ed., *Religious Movements in Melanesia Today* (2), Point 3 (1983), pp. 241-242.

⁴ *Ibid.*

punishment can be imposed by an evil spirit, or by another human, through the use of sorcery. Consequently, suffering is not only to be avoided, but indicates that something is wrong in the life of the person who suffers. If the person is a Christian, then this “wrong” is characteristically regarded as sin.

It is not difficult, then, to see the problem for Melanesian Christians. Suffering is common, and difficult to avoid. However, to a worldview, where the general concept of God pictures Him as, principally, retributive,⁵ this suffering will, inevitably, be interpreted as punishment for sin. This leads to feelings of guilt, and further anxiety in the sufferer.

Perhaps, more significantly, it also creates ill-feelings in the community. Life is viewed as consisting of a complex relatedness of persons, objects, and spirits, and so the wrong, which one person has done can have implications for the whole group.⁶ Therefore, if the group seems to be suffering some misfortune, for example, poor crop yields, then it is perceived as being due to the sin of one, or more, members of the group. The writer has observed that this results in something similar to a “witch-hunt” to find the person responsible, and this occurs, at times, even among those who profess to have accepted the gospel.

It is hoped, therefore, that, by examining what Paul has to say about suffering, some lessons can be learnt, which can be applied to the Melanesian situation, and provide some helpful correctives.

Paul and Suffering

In Acts 9:15-16, Paul’s call is linked to suffering, and in 2 Corinthians, Paul refers to his sufferings, to defend the legitimacy

⁵ Gernot Fugmann, “Fundamental Issues for a Theology in Melanesia”, in Brian Schwarze, ed., *An Introduction to Ministry in Melanesia, Point 7* (1984), p. 92.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

of his apostleship.⁷ In fact, Paul's most sustained handling of the subject of suffering occurs in 2 Corinthians.⁸ Before we turn to examine these writings, however, it is necessary to discuss, briefly, the cultural, intellectual, and experiential influences that may have shaped the way Paul regarded suffering.

(a) Background to Paul's Understanding of Suffering

In the Old Testament, it is possible to determine three main attitudes to suffering. First, it is sometimes seen as retributive. This is not surprising, given the story of the fall in Gen 3, where Adam and Eve are punished for their disobedience. It also results from the strong sense of divine justice, evident in the OT.⁹ Secondly, suffering is portrayed as educative and exemplary. Prov 3:11 reveals the expectation that God, as a loving Father, would discipline His children. This attitude is also illustrated in the lives of OT characters, such as Job and Abraham. Thirdly, there is some suggestion that suffering was occasionally understood as vicarious and redemptive. This is evident in some of the prophets, who suffer on behalf of the people, but, perhaps most notably, is seen in the Suffering Servant of Is 52:13-53:12.¹⁰

It is suggested by Schoeps that suffering was highly valued in Judaism of every period.¹¹ Commenting on Tannaitic literature, Sanders notes that:

The suffering of God's people is repeatedly emphasised, and suffering comes to play a significant role in Rabbinic theology. Sufferings are to be accepted with joy . . .

⁷ Paul W. Barnett, "Apostle", in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, G. F. Hawthorne, R. P. Martin, and D. G. Reid, eds, Downers Grove IL: IVP, 1993, pp. 49-50.

⁸ Hafemann, "Suffering", p. 919.

⁹ E.g., Ps 62:12; Prov 24:12.

¹⁰ R. B. Edwards, "Suffering", in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, G. W. Bromiley, ed., Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1988, pp. 650ff.

¹¹ H. J. Schoeps, *Paul: the Theology of the Apostle in the Light of Jewish Religious History*, H. Knight, tran., London UK: Lutterworth Press, 1961, p. 128.

because they are part of God's overall redemptive purpose toward Israel.¹²

Part of the reason for this positive approach to suffering was a reflection on the events of the Maccabean period. Suffering came to be seen as part of the destiny of the people of God.¹³ However, suffering was seen not only in this positive light. The most-widely held view among the Jewish people was that suffering was a consequence of sin.¹⁴ At times, Paul, himself, shared this view.¹⁵ The cause of this is most likely the seriousness, with which sin was regarded, as it impacted on the moral standing of both nation and individual before the covenant God.¹⁶

Paul's practice of listing his afflictions¹⁷ has parallels in both Hellenistic and Jewish apocalyptic literature.¹⁸ In these writings, suffering becomes a test of character, and is part of the divine plan.¹⁹

For this reason, some have suggested that Paul was influenced by these traditions. However, there are also some significant differences. Unlike the Stoic, who endured suffering under his own inner strength, Paul relied on God's strength, to be

¹² E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, London UK: SCM Press, 1989, p. 105.

¹³ A. E. Harvey, *Renewal Through Suffering*, Edinburgh UK: T. & T. Clark, 1996, p. 127.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

¹⁵ Rom 2:18-32; 1 Cor 11:30; 1 Thess 2:15-16.

¹⁶ Harvey, *Renewal Through Suffering*, p. 126.

¹⁷ These lists are often referred to by scholars as *peristasenkataloge*. They can be found in Rom 8:35; 1 Cor 4:9-13; 2 Cor 4:8-9; 6:4-5; 11:23-29; 12:10.

¹⁸ Ch. Ukachuku Manus, "Apostolic Suffering (2 Cor 6:4-10): The Sign of Christian Existence and Identity", in *The Asia Journal of Theology* 1-1 (1987), pp. 46-49. See also, Colin G. Kruse, "Afflictions, Trials, Hardships", in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, G. F. Hawthorne, R. P. Martin, and D. G. Reid, eds, Downers Grove IL: IVP, 1993, p. 19.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

able to persevere.²⁰ Paul readily admitted the discomfort caused by the hardships he endured, and did not attempt to feign a serenity in the inner person?²¹ Paul also saw a greater purpose in the sufferings than simply being an inevitable part of the messianic woes that Jewish apocalyptics believed signalled the end times?²² Therefore, while Paul may have been aware of this literary tradition, the differences suggest that he adapted it to suit his own purposes. This adaptation was influenced, to some extent, by the OT tradition, but, most significantly, by Paul's appreciation of the suffering and death of Christ.²³

(b) Suffering in 2 Corinthians

As stated earlier, Paul's most detailed teachings on suffering are found in 2 Cor. Mak has identified eight passages, which speak directly of suffering. These are 1:3-11; 2:1-7; 4:7-12; 4:16-5:4; 6:4-10; 7:7-11; 11:23b-29; 12:7-10.²⁴ To this we could add 8:1-2, where Paul speaks, not of his own suffering, but of that of the Macedonian churches.

It is not possible, here, to present a detailed exegesis of each of these passages. Instead, a short summary of each passage will be given, in an attempt to show the contribution they make to Paul's complex attitude to suffering.

2 Cor 1:3-11. These verses constitute a thanksgiving, which, in many Greek letters, and usually in Paul's writings, followed the introductory address, as it does here.²⁵ This thanksgiving, however, is different, because it does not give

²⁰ Manus, "Apostolic Suffering", p. 48.

²¹ Kruse, "Afflictions, Trials, Hardships", p. 19.

²² Manus, "Apostolic Suffering", p. 49.

²³ Kruse, "Afflictions, Trials, Hardships", p. 19; Manus, "Apostolic Suffering", p. 49.

²⁴ A. K. Mak, "Toward a Holistic View of Pauline Suffering: A Contextual Study on 2 Corinthians", DTheol thesis, Australian College of Theology, 1996, p. i.

²⁵ C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, London UK: A. & C. Black, 1973, p. 57.

thanks for the spread of the gospel, as in Romans, or for the recipients of the gospel as in 1 Corinthians and Philippians, but, instead, focuses on the comfort experienced by Paul and his companions during times of trouble and suffering.²⁶ Paul identifies these sufferings with the *sufferings of Christ* (v. 5). This term has been variously interpreted.²⁷ It could refer to the same type of sufferings that Christ experienced, or to the more general messianic sufferings that were expected to accompany the messianic age. It is possible that Paul had in mind both ideas.²⁸ Either way, for Paul, these sufferings were a result of his preaching the gospel of Christ, and, thus, an integral part of his ministry.²⁹

Another significant aspect of these verses, is the connection of suffering and comfort.³⁰ Barrett suggests this is also related to the identification of the sufferings with Christ's sufferings. The sufferings of Christ are redemptive, and so, through Christ, Paul's sufferings overflow into the lives of the Corinthians to bring comfort?³¹

2 Cor 2:1-7 and 7:7-11. Both these texts refer to the occasions of the interim, or painful, visit, and the "tearful" or "severe" letter. These passages are not normally given any attention in studies on Pauline suffering. However, it is Mak's contention that, by limiting the discussion only to Paul's external sufferings and persecutions, only a partial picture is obtained. It is also necessary to look at the inner anguish Paul experienced for the welfare of the church.³² As is suggested by words such as "painful", "severe", "tearful", Paul, indeed, suffered great anxiety and sorrow as a result of these incidents.

²⁶ Colin G. Kruse, *2 Corinthians*, Leicester UK: IVP, 1987, p. 59.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 61-62, for a helpful listing of the alternatives. See also V. P. Furnish, *II Corinthians*, Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1984, pp. 118-120.

²⁸ Barrett, *Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 60.

²⁹ Mak, "Toward a Holistic View of Pauline Suffering", pp. 52-63.

³⁰ Furnish, *II Corinthians*, pp. 120-121.

³¹ Barrett, *Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 62.

³² Mak, "Toward a Holistic View of Pauline Suffering", p. 71.

There was also pain and sorrow on the part of the Corinthian congregation, and the offender.³³ This sorrow, however, can be viewed positively, because it was a godly sorrow that led to repentance.

2 Cor 4:7-12. In these verses, we find the first hardship catalogue (vv. 8 and 9), which serves to illustrate the relationship between human weakness and divine power, expressed in v. 7.³⁴ Paul's hardships have served as a vehicle for the manifestation of God's power (v. 7), and resulted in life for the Corinthians (v. 12).

In vv. 10 and 11, Paul again identifies his sufferings with those of Christ, and he does so through an interesting expression: "*we always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body*" (v. 10). Christ's death on the cross becomes the model for Paul, in his sufferings, and at the same time, the cause of his sufferings. To share in the life of Christ means also to share in His rejection, suffering, and death, and, like Christ, to do so willingly, and for the glory of God.³⁵ Kruse expresses this well:

Thus, the one, who proclaims the risen Lord, finds that, what is proclaimed in his message is also exemplified in his life. On the one hand, he is daily subject to forces, which lead to death, but, on the other, he is continually upheld, caused to triumph, and made to be more than a conqueror by the experience of the risen life of Jesus in his mortal body.³⁶

2 Cor 4:16-5:4. In referring to the wearing away of the outer man, v. 16 points back to the effects of the sufferings on

³³ Ibid., p. 86.

³⁴ Kruse, *2 Corinthians*, pp. 106-107.

³⁵ Alister E. McGrath, "Theology of the Cross", in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, G. F. Hawthorne, R. P. Martin, and D. G. Reid, eds, Downers Grove IL: IVP, 1993, p. 196.

³⁶ Kruse, *2 Corinthians*, pp. 107-108.

Paul's physical body (4:7-12). These afflictions are then given their correct orientation in vv. 17 and 18, by pointing forward to 5:1-10, to the glory, which awaits Paul in eternity.³⁷ By looking to the future, Paul is not only able to endure the present trials, but also gives those afflictions a positive perspective,

with the eyes of faith, he is enabled to see beyond the visible and tangible . . . to the eternal realities of that world, where God's glory shines in the person of Christ (4:6).³⁸

Thus, the benefits of suffering are not limited to the future. There is also a value in the present, as a means of drawing the believer closer to Christ.³⁹ Despite this eschatological orientation, and other benefits that the sufferings produce, Paul honestly admits, in 5:1-4, that his afflictions cause him distress. There is no pretence of escape from pain; Paul groans to be released from his burden.

2 Cor 6:4-10. These verses form the second hardship catalogue in 2 Cor, and the first of the two catalogues in this letter, which Paul uses as a self-commendation.⁴⁰ The fact that Paul commends himself with a list of hardships is significant. Almost certainly, one of the key issues, in the dispute between Paul and the Corinthian community is the interpretation of Paul's sufferings.⁴¹ Paul's ability to endure these trials not only provides a character reference, but is certain proof that God's power is present in his life and ministry.⁴² Only by the enabling of God,

³⁷ Mak, "Toward a Holistic View of Pauline Suffering", pp. 121-123.

³⁸ Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians*, Waco TX: Word Books, 1986, p. 95.

³⁹ Harvey, *Renewal Through Suffering*, p. 128.

⁴⁰ Mak, "Toward a Holistic View of Pauline Suffering", p. 172.

⁴¹ Paul Brooks Duff, "Apostolic Suffering and the Language of Processions in 2 Corinthians 4:7-10", in *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 21-4 (1991), p. 159.

⁴² J. T. Fitzgerald, *Cracks in an Earthen Vessel: An Examination of the Catalogues of Hardships in the Corinthian Correspondence*, Atlanta GA: Scholars Press, 1988, p. 201. Quoted in review by Gordon D. Fee, *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 52 (1990), p. 747. See also S. J. Hafemann, "Self-

could Paul survive these various trials. More than just surviving, however, Paul emerges rejoicing (v. 10). This unexpected joy allows Paul to connect suffering and virtues (vv. 6 and 7) as positive dispositions in his life.⁴³

2 Cor 8:1-2. Here, Paul offers the example of the Macedonian churches, whose “*rich generosity*” arose out of “*the most severe trial*”. The churches in Macedonia were born in the midst of opposition and persecution, and this persecution continued to plague them at the time Paul was writing this letter. Their sufferings were further compounded by great poverty.⁴⁴

While Paul’s intention is to encourage the Corinthians to give generously, the example given demonstrates two aspects of Paul’s understanding on suffering:

1. It is not only possible for Paul to rejoice in sufferings, but all believers.
2. Believers demonstrate the cross of Christ in their lives, when, despite affliction or persecution, they express love for others.⁴⁵

2 Cor 11:23b-29. This is the third hardship catalogue, and the second time Paul uses such a list to commend his ministry. As well as the physical strain on his body, of beatings, deprivations, and dangers (vv. 23-27), Paul endured the mental anguish, caused by his concern for the churches (vv. 28-29).⁴⁶ The spiritual

commendation and Apostolic Legitimacy in 2 Corinthians: A Pauline Dialectic?”, in *New Testament Studies* 36 (1990), p. 85.

⁴³ Manus, “Apostolic Suffering”, pp. 49-50.

⁴⁴ Kruse, *2 Corinthians*, p. 150.

⁴⁵ Hafemann, “Suffering”, p. 920.

⁴⁶ Martin, *2 Corinthians*, p. 387.

anxiety that results from Paul's empathy, expressed in v. 29, indicates Paul's sincerity as an apostle.⁴⁷

In these verses, Paul draws no distinction between his work, and suffering for the gospel. In fact, he practically describes his toil for the gospel, in terms of his sufferings. Paul's sufferings prove his labour for the gospel, and thus, he is able to commend himself as a true servant of Christ.⁴⁸

There is a danger that this list could be interpreted as triumphalist. The account of his humiliating escape from Damascus, in the verses which immediately follow (vv. 30-33), help correct this,⁴⁹ as does the next passage on suffering, to which we will now turn.

2 Cor 12:7-10. This passage mentions Paul's famous "thorn in the flesh", and repeats a theme expressed earlier in 2 Cor 4:7, that God's power is present in Paul's weakness.⁵⁰

It is not clear what Paul meant by his "*thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan*" (v. 7). Speculation, as to its meaning, has occurred throughout church history.⁵¹ It is likely that we will never know Paul's exact intent with certainty. Nevertheless, and, in fact, regardless of what the "thorn" is, two elements of thinking are evident. First, the thorn was given by God. This is not stated explicitly, but is inferred by the use of the passive, ἐδόθη (*edothē*

⁴⁷ M. L. Barre, "Qumran and the 'Weakness' of Paul", in *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 42 (1980), p. 217.

⁴⁸ Mak, "Toward a Holistic View of Pauline Suffering", p. 241.

⁴⁹ Kruse, *2 Corinthians*, p. 198.

⁵⁰ Barre, "Qumran and the 'Weakness' of Paul", p. 221.

⁵¹ Martin, *2 Corinthians*, p. 412. For concise reviews of the various interpretations, see L. Woods, "Opposition to a Man and His Message: Paul's Thorn in the Flesh", in *Australian Biblical Review* 39 (1991), pp. 44-53; T. Y. Mullins, "Paul's Thorn in the Flesh", in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 76 (1957), pp. 299-303; Kruse, *2 Corinthians*, p. 206, notes that the suggestions fall into three main categories: (1) spiritual harassment; (2) persecution at the hands of Jewish, or other, opponents of Paul; (3) some kind of physical or mental illness or injury.

= there was given).⁵² This suggests that Paul understood that God may allow suffering, when it achieves His purpose. This is the second element. The thorn was given for a purpose, primarily, to prevent Paul from becoming conceited by the privilege of having observed the “*surpassingly great revelations*”. Furthermore, another purpose is achieved. In declining Paul’s plea to remove the thorn (v. 8), God teaches him the relation between divine power and human weakness. Rather than triumph in his ability to survive the many and various afflictions, which he experiences, Paul is able to rejoice in these afflictions, themselves. Paul recognises that, in these weaknesses, “*Christ’s power*” is at work in him (vv. 9-10). The thorn, whatever it is, and God’s enabling of Paul to endure it, serve to authenticate his ministry. Paul is God’s servant, at work in the proclamation of God’s gospel, by God’s grace and strength.⁵³

c. A Summary of Paul’s Teaching on Suffering in 2 Corinthians

By combining the principles taught, and attitudes reflected by Paul in the above passages, the following can be said about suffering in 2 Corinthians:

1. All believers, and not just apostles, can expect to experience suffering.⁵⁴ This is deduced, firstly, by Paul’s use of the first person plural, suggesting there is no distinction drawn between apostolic and non-apostolic suffering.⁵⁵ Further support for this comes

⁵² Martin, *2 Corinthians*, p. 412. See also, Barre, “Qumran and the ‘Weakness’ of Paul”, p. 223.

⁵³ J. W. McCant, “Paul’s Thorn of Rejected Apostleship”, in *New Testament Studies* 34-4 (1988), p. 572.

⁵⁴ Kruse, “Afflictions, Trials, Hardships”, p. 19.

⁵⁵ This assumes that Paul uses “we” as inclusive of other Christians. Some scholars disagree with this assumption, suggesting that “we” here is a literary plural, and thus refers only to Paul. See S. J. Hafemann, *Suffering and Ministry in the Spirit*, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1990, p. 12ff; P. R. Jones, “Review of ‘Suffering and the Spirit: An Exegetical Study of II Cor 2:14-3:3 within the context of the Corinthian Correspondence’, by S. J. Hafemann”, in *The*

from 1:5-7, 2:1-7, and 7:7-11, where Paul expects not only himself and his coworkers to suffer, but the Corinthians as well. Thirdly, by identifying the suffering of believers with those of Christ (1:6; 4:10, 11), Paul teaches that all believers can expect to share in the same fate as Christ, in being rejected and persecuted.⁵⁶ Furthermore, Paul depicts himself as a model servant of God, because of the afflictions he has endured (6:4-5; 11:23b-29). Therefore, anyone who claims to be a servant of God, must be prepared to experience suffering as well.⁵⁷

2. Human weakness becomes a platform for the display of God's power.⁵⁸ This was displayed most vividly in the work of Jesus Christ, in His human existence.⁵⁹ The divine power, which was evident in Christ's life, and which raised Him from the dead, is the same power, which strengthens Paul, and enables him to endure his sufferings. Consequently, Paul's afflictions, and the power, which is at work in him in these weaknesses, allows Paul's life to be a reflection of the death and resurrection of Christ (4:10-11), and thus confirm his gospel message.⁶⁰ Mak argues, from 12:7-10, that there are two conditions to this divine

Evangelical Quarterly 59-4 (1987), p. 371. Note that Mak, "Toward a Holistic View of Pauline Suffering", pp. 264, 279-317, provides a detailed study on the use of literary plural, and concludes there is a lack of evidence to support the claim of Hafemann and others.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 266. Hafemann, "Suffering", p. 920. See also Phil 1:29; 1 Thess 3:3-4.

⁵⁷ Mak, "Toward a Holistic View of Pauline Suffering", p. 265.

⁵⁸ Duff, "Apostolic Suffering", p. 164.

⁵⁹ D. A. Black, "Weakness", in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, G. F. Hawthorne, R. P. Martin, and D. G. Reid, eds, Downers Grove IL: IVP, 1993, p. 966.

⁶⁰ Mak, "Toward a Holistic View of Pauline Suffering", p. 268.

power. It is only given to those who are humble, and who suffer for the sake of Christ.⁶¹

3. Suffering teaches reliance upon God. Through experiences that led him to despair of life itself, Paul learned that his own strength was insufficient, and, instead, he must rely on God (1:8, 9).⁶² This also led to a confidence that, because God had delivered him in the past, He would continue to do so in the future. This is not to indicate that Paul always believed he would be rescued by God. From the account of his “*thorn in the flesh*”, Paul was aware that, at times, God would allow the suffering to continue, so that His purposes could be achieved. However, even in the event of death, Paul looked forward to the deliverance that would be his through the resurrection.⁶³ This demonstrates, in part, the connection between suffering and hope.
4. Suffering and hope are interrelated.⁶⁴ Paul’s future hope in the resurrection not only strengthened him in his struggle against suffering, but also demonstrated the correct perspective, from which to view suffering; i.e., looking to the future. Sufferings are not to be thought of as permanent. Our present condition is not the final one for Christians.⁶⁵ Compared with the future, eternal glory that awaits believers, our current trials and afflictions can be seen as “*light and momentary troubles*” (4:17).
5. Suffering and comfort are interrelated. One of God’s purposes in allowing His children to suffer is that

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 270.

⁶² Kruse, “Afflictions, Trials, Hardships”, p. 20.

⁶³ Mak, “Toward a Holistic View of Pauline Suffering”, p. 272.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. ii, 274-275.

⁶⁵ Manus, “Apostolic Suffering”, p. 50.

they are then able to comfort others, who experience suffering (1:3-7).⁶⁶

6. Suffering develops Christian character. It teaches humility, and serves as an anti-triumphalist factor in our present life (12:7).⁶⁷ It can lead to repentance, through godly sorrow that, in turn, produces earnestness and eagerness in Christian service (7:8-11). It encourages reflection on the selfless love, demonstrated by Christ, and modelled by the Macedonian churches (8:1-2). Paul's own willingness to suffer on behalf of his churches serves as a further example of Christian love.⁶⁸
7. Paul's attitude to suffering was complex. At various places in 2 Corinthians, Paul indicates that he dreaded suffering, and was quite fearful of it.⁶⁹ Yet, at the same time, Paul says that he delights in "*weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties*" (12:10). The reason for this "delight" is that suffering taught Paul humility (12:7), and allowed God's power to be manifested in his life (12:8-10). Mak suggests that these conflicting elements in Paul's attitude toward suffering can be reconciled. Despite the fact that Paul feared and dreaded his various afflictions, he was able to welcome them, because he recognised God at work in his sufferings to bring good out of evil.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Kruse, "Afflictions, Trials, Hardships", p. 20.

⁶⁷ Manus, "Apostolic Suffering", p. 50.

⁶⁸ Hafemann, "Suffering", p. 920.

⁶⁹ Mak, "Toward a Holistic View of Pauline Suffering", p. 273. See 2 Cor 1:8; 4:16-17; 5:3; 11:27-29; 12:8.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 274.

Lessons for Melanesia

(a) Suffering can be Viewed Positively

While there are some Melanesian Christian leaders, who have adopted a positive view of suffering,⁷¹ this is yet to occur among the Christian populace, as a whole. No doubt, this is largely a function of the strong traditional belief that suffering always has an evil source.⁷²

In the introduction, it was stated that suffering is almost always attributed to punishment for some wrongdoing. This punishment is mediated through evil spirits, or the violent acts of other humans. This concept of “pay-back” governs the entire life of a Melanesian, and has been referred to by some as “retributive logic”.⁷³ It teaches that all acts, whether good or bad, must be repaid in kind. Conversely, this means that the circumstances one experiences are the result of the acts one has performed, and, thus, sickness, death, success, etc., are explained in this way.⁷⁴ The good person, because he is good, does not suffer.⁷⁵

The lessons from 2 Cor challenge this perception of reality. While it is true that Paul did, at times, attribute suffering to punishment for sins,⁷⁶ it is clear, from these writings, that his understanding of suffering was, on the whole, far more positive.

⁷¹ See, for example, Joshua K. Daimoi, “Struggles Faced in Living God’s Kingdom: Papua New Guinea and Irian Jaya”, in John D’Arcy May, ed., *Living Theology in Melanesia: a Reader*, Point 8 (1985), p. 124.

⁷² Theo Aerts, “Prayers of the Past”, in “Prayers of the Past”, in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 4-1 (1988), pp. 28-79. This article contains a comprehensive listing of pre-Christian prayers of various tribes in Papua New Guinea. A predominant theme in these prayers is seeking protection from evil, and the suffering associated with it.

⁷³ Garry W. Trompf, “Retributive Logic in Melanesian Belief”, in *Religion in Melanesia*, Garry W. Trompf, and C. E. Loeliger, eds, Port Moresby PNG: University of PNG, 1980, pp. 96f.

⁷⁴ Fugmann, “Fundamental Issues”, p. 89.

⁷⁵ Stilwell, “Towards a Melanesian Theology of Conversion”, in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 9-1 (1993), p. 41.

⁷⁶ See p. 67, n. 15.

The many affirmative purposes that Paul ascribes to suffering, not to mention the example of the life of Christ Himself, must be used to broaden the Melanesian attitude to suffering. Paul clearly teaches that the innocent do suffer, and that this suffering can be used by God for His glory. Suffering does not necessarily indicate the presence of sin in the life of the person who suffers.

The primary lesson, then, that needs to be taught to Melanesian Christians, about suffering from 2 Cor, is that God sometimes allows suffering for good. God can, and does, use suffering to achieve His purposes, such as those, which were listed earlier. Paul's life, and that of the One he imitates, Jesus Christ, become clear demonstrations that suffering does not automatically result from sin, or is due to punishment. In fact, suffering can even be the vehicle for the manifestation of God's power.

(b) Weakness and Power

The issue of power is critical for Melanesians. This is because their world is conceptualised in mythical terms, where reality came into being, as a result of the deeds of supernatural beings. For the people of primal societies in Melanesia, this reality is mirrored in the relationships between humans, deities, spirits, and the natural environment. As loss or trial occurs, the original revelation of the myth is re-enacted, through ritual, in an attempt to access spiritual power, known as *mana*, so as to achieve a renewal of life, a new beginning.⁷⁷

The out-working of this concept, in the lives of Melanesian Christians, is often seen "in the pursuit of God's power for practical everyday life . . . the power to find lost pigs . . . to foresee approaching troubles, and identify enemies".⁷⁸ Therefore, a basis exists for the Melanesian to appreciate Paul's teaching on the relationship between weakness and power, although some

⁷⁷ Fugmann, "Fundamental Issues", pp. 74-75. Stilwell, "Towards a Melanesian Theology of Conversion", p. 34.

⁷⁸ Teske, "Worship the Father in Spirit and Truth", p. 244.

important clarifications are necessary. We can expect to witness God's power, in the face of sickness, trial, or loss, but this power may not necessarily be evident in deliverance or healing. God's power is manifested in human weakness, as a demonstration, and authentication, of the gospel. It must be understood that the story of Christ is of One, who suffered and died; and then, through the power of God, was raised from the dead. The cross of Christ is the paradigm for a Christian understanding of both suffering and power. Suffering, in the life of the believer, can be viewed as a demonstration of the reality of the cross.

(c) The Believer and Suffering

Paul teaches us that we can expect to share in the sufferings of Christ, and, indeed, that suffering should be seen as a legitimate sign of a servant of God. Suffering thus changes from being a sign of punishment to a badge of honour, worn for Christ.⁷⁹ This should not be construed to teach a martyr theology – suffering is not to be sought for its own sake. While Paul did not run from affliction, or necessarily ascribe it to divine wrath, he nevertheless displayed a dread and fear of it.

The importance of relationships, in the Melanesian worldview, can be utilised to teach that life, for a Melanesian Christian, can only be spoken of in terms of relationship to Christ.⁸⁰ This means that Christ not only becomes the model for a Melanesian attitude to suffering, but that He provides the correct perspective, from which to view suffering. Christ willingly suffered and died so that the Father's purpose might be achieved. Christ was able to look beyond the cross to His future glory. Paul demonstrated this same future orientation.

⁷⁹ Black, "Weakness", p. 966.

⁸⁰ Fugmann, "Fundamental Issues", pp. 94-95.

(d) Suffering and the Future Hope

A mythical worldview strongly links the past with the present.⁸¹ This means that a central concern for Melanesian religions is to revitalise those forces from the past, so that life can be experienced in the present.⁸² Obviously, then, the Melanesian focuses on these two aspects of time – past and present. This creates difficulties in understanding suffering, as Paul sees it. It is necessary for the Melanesian Christian to reorient his thinking on suffering to become more eschatological. This is not to say that the past and present must be ignored. However, so that sufferings can be understood in the way that Paul teaches in 2 Corinthians, they must be seen in the context of eternity, and of the future glory that awaits believers.

Conclusion

Paul's teaching on suffering in 2 Corinthians was not an abstract theology, but the fruit of spiritual reflection on his extensive personal experience of many and varied afflictions. This reflection had, as its locus, the cross of Christ. As a result, Paul's sufferings provide a model for Christians in Melanesia. His response to his afflictions, and his understanding of their purpose in the divine plan, indicate that it is possible for the Christian to view suffering positively. Indeed, suffering may even be seen as the authenticating mark of a genuine Christian ministry.

This conflicts with the traditional Melanesian understanding of suffering, and, therefore, requires careful consideration by Melanesian Christians. This is particularly a challenge, in the concepts of "payback" and "power". The good person can suffer, and this does not necessarily indicate an absence of God's power. Instead, God's power can become evident in this weakness.

⁸¹ See J. McCarthy, *Legends of Papua New Guinea*, Adelaide SA: Rigby, 1973, for numerous examples of this.

⁸² Fugmann, "Fundamental Issues", p. 76.

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