

Suffering as Qualification for Ministry

Nathan Maroney

<https://orcid.org/0009-0007-5629-5660>

Southeastern Seminary

NathanMaroney@live.com

UDK: 2-185.2:2-733:27-248.4

Original scientific paper

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32862/k.18.1.1>

Abstract

The realities of Christ and the Gospel were for Paul powerful interpretive tools. In his letters, Paul uses these realities as lenses to interpret his suffering. This article examines elements of Paul's thought where suffering is interpreted as positive for ministry. First, in Ephesians and Philemon, we discuss the term "Prisoner for Christ," and the ways Paul sees this as a title of honor that qualifies him with authority. Second, in the Corinthians correspondence, we examine the way Paul connects apostleship and suffering, listing his sufferings as qualifications. Third, in 2 Corinthians 1, we look at how Paul sees suffering as contributing to empathy in ministry. Finally, we trace echoes of similar thoughts elsewhere in the New Testament.

Keywords: *Paul, New Testament, suffering, ministry, empathy*

Introduction

This article explores the ways Paul sees his suffering as qualifying and training him for ministry (for the issue of the authorship of the Pauline epistles, see Andersen 2016; Capes 2024). Our goal is to interpret Paul's interpretation of his lived experience. The person of Christ and the events of the Gospel were for Paul powerful interpretive tools. This is why Paul can say seemingly contradictory things about believers' lives. If someone is unmarried, this has benefits for their devotion to Christ (1 Cor 7:8). If someone is married, it is a picture of the devotion between Christ and the Church (Eph 5:22-33). There is one God and one Christ, so idols

and food sacrificed to idols are nothing (1 Cor 8:4). Yet one who is united to the one Christ does not unite themselves to idols through table fellowship (1 Cor 10:21). The gospel makes Paul completely free in Christ (Gal 3:28), while also making him completely a slave for Christ (Gal 1:10). Every aspect of life is interpreted through the grid of the gospel.

Suffering is no different. Paul interprets suffering which others might interpret as general suffering as suffering for the faith (Maroney 2023). Paul also notes that suffering is to be prayed against so that the believer has the benefit of freedom to share the gospel. However, if suffering happens, it is beneficial for the spread of the gospel (Maroney 2023). In this article, we will explore additional ways Paul adds layers of meaning to his suffering, by interpreting it as credentials for his ministry. This will be seen in Paul's use of the "Prisoner of Christ" title, in the way he connects suffering and apostleship, and the way he sees suffering as enabling empathy. We will also examine echoes of these ideas in other New Testament writings. Granted, caution must be exercised in drawing connections across different writings within the New Testament. Thus, we will look not only at similarities but also differences of emphasis. Nevertheless, it is part of the task of interpretation to trace repeated ideas throughout the Christian canon.

1. The "Prisoner of Christ" Title

Paul sees being persecuted for Christ as an honor, one that qualifies him with authority. The background of the "Prisoner of Christ" title is in the title "servant of Christ Jesus." This title appears in many letter openings (see Rom 1:1; Gal 1:10; Phil 1:1; Tit 1:1; Jas 1:1; 2 Pet 1:1; Jude 1; cf. Rev 1:1). The term is based on the Old Testament phrase "servant of the Lord," related to the broader concept of "serving" (עבד) YHWH. "Servant" (literally "slave") is obviously a term of humility and Israel generally was said to serve God (eg. Exod 4:23). But the term becomes a specific term for certain leaders, and is a term of honor. For leaders like Moses and Joshua, the honorary term is not applied to them until the end of, or after, their life (Deut 34:5; Josh 1:1; 24:29; see Dempster 2007, 128–178), suggesting the title is not given lightly. Since Christ is Lord, Paul applies this title to himself as a servant of Jesus. To activate the conceptual metaphor of "lord" naturally requires the activation of "slave." (Hafeman 2000b, 27). Thus, Paul's affirmation of the concept that Jesus is Lord entails seeing himself as his slave.

In certain passages, Paul develops a similar phrase "prisoner of Christ Jesus." This is also clearly a term of humility and devoted service to Christ, but in the way, Paul uses it is also a title that bears authority. In Ephesians 3:1, Paul describes himself as a "prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles," which launches him into a digression (3:1-13) explaining his stewardship (οἰκονομίαν) to take the mystery of the gospel to the world. Paul describes his task as that of a house-

hold manager (οικονομία), which has the sense of managing not his own house, but of a servant managing the house of his master. He has authority, but it is an intermediate and derived authority. Paul emphasizes his lowliness by noting he is merely a servant (διάκονος), and the “more least” of the apostles (the term he uses is ἐλαχιστοτέρω, which combines comparative and superlative adjectival morphemes), Ephesians 3:7-8 (cf. 1 Cor 4:1, “This is how one should regard us, as servants (ὑπηρέτας) of Christ and stewards (οικονόμους) of the mysteries of God”). Paul asks the Ephesians not to lose heart over his suffering for them (3:13) and prays for their comprehension of the gospel (3:14-18). He wants them to understand there is a positive interpretation to his suffering, namely that his suffering is their glory (3:13). In Ephesians 4:1, he uses the term again as he shifts toward the ethical section of the letter, “I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called.” That a prisoner can give ethical instruction is shocking, but makes sense in the logic of the gospel, which exalts the humble. His ethical call includes humility (4:2), and so part of his reason for using the title could be to point to his humility. But he also seems to imply that because he is a prisoner on their behalf, they should listen to what he has to say to them.

The letter to Philemon similarly begins with the title “Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus.” Nowhere in the letter is the metaphor of Christ-follower as *slave* used in the letter, perhaps because Paul did not want that metaphor to be associated with Onesimus’ slavery by his reader Philemon. In the letter Paul urges Philemon to release his slave Onesimus, reminding him that Paul could command him to do this in Christ, but wanting instead to appeal to him for love’s sake (Phlm 8-9). He then reminds him who he is, “I Paul, an old man (or ambassador, πρεσβύτης, see below) and now a prisoner for Christ Jesus.” The political state is not mentioned in Philemon - it is not important to the point Paul is making. Instead, he describes his chains as “the chains of the gospel” (Phlm 13). Part of the reason for using the phrase could be to contrast Paul’s right to make ethical demands in Christ of Philemon on the one hand, with Paul’s humility as a prisoner on the other hand. But we also see that Paul sees real authority in the title of a prisoner for Christ (Wright 2008, 189–190), as Paul uses it to replace the servant of Christ title, and brings it up in a context of making ethical demands.

There is a translational issue involving Ephesians 6:20, “πρεσβεύω ἐν ἀλύσει” and Philemon 9 “πρεσβύτης, σὺνὶ δὲ καὶ δέσμιος χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ.” The former is usually translated “I am an ambassador in chains,” and the latter, “Now an old man and prisoner of Christ Jesus.” It is likely, however, that the two passages refer to a similar idea, and thus that the translation of one of the passages needs to be changed (see, for instance, Wright 2008, 189–190). The word for ambassador is technically πρεσβεύω and the word for elder is πρεσβύτης, but there are examples of interchange of the two in Greek. If the ambassador’s reading is taken, then the

connection of the ambassador's idea with the prisoner's idea gives further evidence for the prisoner's title as one of authority. The intermediate/derived authority of an ambassador is also similar to that of the household manager discussed above.

There is another translational difference between Ephesians 3:1 and Philemon 1. Many translations including the ESV have in Ephesians 3:1 "prisoner of Christ Jesus" (see, for instance, KJV, CSB, ESV, NASB, NIV). But in Philemon 1 the ESV has "prisoner for Christ Jesus." Certainly, it is true in both cases that Paul is a prisoner *for* Christ. But there is evidence that Paul did not just see his imprisonment as for Christ, but *by* Christ. Christ was the prison-master who put him there, as it were (cf. Phil 1:13. It is also intriguing that in Ephesians 4:8 Paul talks of Christ's victory as a leading of captives and in 4:2 of Christian unity as a "chain" of peace). Hafeman has noted that Paul's reference to Christ leading him in a triumphal procession (θριαμβεύοντι, 2 Cor 2:14) has its background in triumphal Roman processions of conquered slaves or prisoners (Hafeman 1989, 334; similarly Paul B. Duff 2015 particularly 18–92). Elsewhere he writes, "In calling Paul to be a minister of the new covenant (2 Cor 3:4–6), God sentenced Paul to death (2 Cor 1:9; cf. 1 Cor 4:9)" (Hafeman 2000a, 23). This is not a march of victory; instead, Paul is being led to his death (cf. Hafeman 1989, 334). This would make sense of the way Paul describes himself in Ephesians 3:1 as being a prisoner of Christ (τοῦ χριστοῦ) for the nations (ὕπερ ὑμῶν τῶν ἐθνῶν). The imprisonment is for the benefit of the nations, so the genitive on the word Christ could refer to something other than the beneficiary, namely the one *to whom* Paul is imprisoned.

We have seen that Paul interprets his ministry within the prisoner framework. Paul is not merely a prisoner of the state but of Christ. This means that his imprisonment, while it still involves humility, involves authority as well, as he uses the title in making ethical demands of the Ephesians and Philemon. This transformation of humility to humility and authority is similar to that of the transformation of the word slave in the phrase slave of YHWH in the Old Testament, or slave of Christ in the New Testament. In phrases like prisoner, slave, household manager, and ambassador, Paul simultaneously describes his ministry as one of humility, and of derived, intermediate authority. This is just one way Paul puts a positive spin on his suffering and persecution in his ministry.

2. Suffering and Apostleship

We turn now to examine the connections in Paul's thoughts between suffering and apostleship. We will see that Paul ironically argues that his suffering contributes to his authority. That Paul sees authority in apostleship is clear from 1 Corinthians 9. In the context of arguing for his right to eat any food, he describes himself as free, an apostle, and someone who has seen the Lord (1 Cor 9:1). If he is not an

apostle to others, he at least is to the Corinthians (1 Cor 9:2). He goes on to note that as an apostle he has a right to be supported financially by them (1 Cor 9:6-12), even comparing himself to those who served in the Levitical temple (1 Cor 9:13-14). Paul is showing that he has authority and rights, but that he gives them up for the sake of fellow believers, as a lesson for how they should act regarding food sacrificed to idols. Paul sees apostleship as entailing authority, honor, and benefits including monetary support. That apostleship entails a place of authority in the church is also clear from 1 Corinthians 12:28, “And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles.”

Yet Paul wants to stress his humility in the Corinthian correspondence as well. Factions have arisen at Corinth with people following different leaders like Paul, Apollos, and Peter (1 Cor 3:1-4). So, Paul notes that they are all nothing but ministers (1 Cor 3:5), servants, and household managers of Christ (1 Cor 4:1). He continues, “I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men” (1 Cor 4:9). He goes on to list other things he has suffered in verses 10-13. And yet, as an apostle, Paul still has authority. He notes that he is not just their guide but their father, and they are his children. They are to imitate him and if they do not, he might visit them and discipline them (1 Cor 4:14-21). In 1 Corinthians 5:3 he notes that though absent in body, he is present in spirit and has cast judgment on a particular sin in the Corinthian congregation. While Paul sees himself as the least of the apostles (15:9), he has the Spirit and commands the Corinthians to imitate him and remain in the traditions he has delivered to them (7:40; 11:1-2, 23; 15:3). In 2 Corinthians, Paul takes this a step further, listing suffering as part of his credentials, to prove his authority. He does not just retain his apostleship despite suffering but through it. In 2 Corinthians 10:8 Paul acknowledges his authority, “even if I boast a little too much of our authority, which the Lord gave for building you up and not for destroying you, I will not be ashamed.” He notes, however, that he will not compare himself with those who commend themselves and will not boast except for that which God has given him (2 Cor 10:12-13). Paul then asks the Corinthians to bear with some foolishness on his part. He writes, “Indeed, I consider that I am not in the least inferior to these super-apostles. Even if I am unskilled in speaking, I am not so in knowledge; indeed, in every way we have made this plain to you in all things...” (2 Cor 11:5-6). He continues, “whatever anyone else dares to boast of—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast of that. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one” (2 Cor 11:21-23). An unsympathetic might say this is prideful speech and a far cry from the humility Paul claims to have. He notes that in this part of the letter he is trying to boast of his credentials to the Corinthians. But he continues, “I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings,

and often near death.” Paul then goes on to *boast* of a long list of his various sufferings in his ministry (2 Cor 11:24-33). He then turns to a positive credential - he *boasts* of someone he knows who experienced a unique revelation (2 Cor 12:1-5).

Part of Paul’s strategy is straightforward, boasting in authority and of the man he knows who received special revelation. But in between these things, he strangely boasts of his suffering. The key to understanding Paul’s argument is in the comparative adjective in 11:23. Paul says he has experienced *greater* labors, *more* imprisonments, and *more* beatings. Who has he suffered more than and why does this matter? These statements are parallel to how he compares himself to the super-apostles earlier in the verse, saying he is a *better* servant of Christ. Hafemman has argued that the entire letter of 2 Corinthians is framed as a response to the super-apostles who were questioning if Paul was an apostle, given that he was suffering (Hafemman 1989, 333).¹ Thus, Paul responds by noting that apostleship and suffering are not opposed, but go hand in hand. Corinth began to look down upon Paul because they were looking to the super-apostles, who saw a suffering Paul as an embarrassment. We must always be careful with hypothetical reconstructions of the background of this letter. But it is clear from the letter itself that Paul is arguing against the super-apostles, and that he is trying to convince the Corinthians that he retains apostolic authority. 2 Corinthians 12:11-12 reads, “I have been a fool! You forced me to it, for I ought to have been commended by you. For I was not at all inferior to these super-apostles, even though I am nothing. The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works.” It is plausible that he states he is not inferior because Corinthians were beginning to think he was inferior due to his suffering.

What we want to note here is that Paul does not just argue that he can be an apostle and suffer, or even that apostles must suffer, but that he lists his sufferings as a qualification for ministry. There is deep irony in his listing of his credentials. He notes that he is a Hebrew of Hebrews, just as much as his opponents (2 Cor 11:22). He notes that in even talking this way he is speaking like a madman (2 Cor 11:23 Paul here literally talks like a madman - the ESV’s “I am a better one” translates ὑπὲρ ἐγώ, a grammatical abnormality since prepositions cannot take the nominative); after all, in Pauline theology, one’s ethnicity is less important than their relationship to Christ. But Paul still makes sure he gets this credential in. He then turns and lists his sufferings, noting that to list these as credentials is to talk like a fool. But within Pauline theology, this makes sense since God’s power is shown through weakness. Paul lists both the credentials his opponents would have cared about and the ones they would not have cared about. Both have

1 For another argument regarding the background of 2 Cor also focusing on leadership, see O’Reilly 2021, 80–95. For a different view, see Paul B. Duff 2015, 18–92.

caveats acknowledging that Paul understands he will sound like a madman to his listeners.

We briefly mention 2 Corinthians 6:2-4, “We put no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger.” Here also Paul connects his ministry, commendation of his authority as a servant of God, and suffering. Paul’s view of ministry and qualification is clear. He sees himself as a more qualified (better) servant of Christ than his opponents, because he has experienced more suffering.

2.1. Suffering and Apostleship in Historical Context

Many have noted similarities between the *peristasis* (list of sufferings) of Paul and Hellenistic philosophers. Free (2017, 80–85) in particular points out that emphasizing suffering was a common rhetorical tool used by traveling teachers and philosophers (especially Stoics), to emphasize credentials. Free takes this as evidence that Paul was exaggerating in his claims about his suffering. Free sees some of Paul’s language as metaphorical or hyperbolic. Free also makes other arguments to minimize Paul’s suffering, noting that house arrest would not have been as bad as traditionally thought, that the suffering Paul lists would have been experienced by anyone who traveled in the ancient world (this makes the opposite point, namely that Paul did suffer, thus there is some inconsistency in the argument here), and that the Roman state was not persecuting Paul, but that Christians were facing the consequences of voluntarily separating from the state.²

Certainly, the distinction between house arrest and prison is an important one. We also do not deny that rhetoric plays a role in Paul’s writing as he is trying to convince. It does seem that Paul interprets general suffering specifically as Christian persecution (Maroney 2023, 40–47), and adds layers of meaning to his lived experience by seeing himself as a prisoner of Christ. But we think Free goes too far. We first note that Free makes conflicting arguments, namely that every traveler would have suffered the way Paul describes, but also Paul’s suffering was not as bad as traditionally thought. If traveling was dangerous for everyone in the ancient world, then it was for Paul. And that it was a common experience does not invalidate Paul’s applying importance and meaning to it.

Second, for Paul, suffering is fully integrated into Christian theology. This does not mean his views could not have been influenced by Hellenistic philosophy. But the suffering Paul experiences is seen by him as having distinctively Christian significance. It is no problem to Pauline theology if all travelers in the ancient

2 For somewhat similar arguments for seeing suffering in early Christianity as a myth, see Moss 2013, especially 215–246.

world experienced suffering. Certainly, those imprisoning or beating Paul were not doing so to qualify Paul for ministry. But that does not mean Paul cannot interpret God as working that way in the events that are occurring. Additionally, if one accepts Hafeman's reconstruction of the background of 2 Corinthians, namely that the super-apostles were saying a suffering apostle is not an apostle - then the super-apostles would be examples of traveling teachers who do not experience the kind of suffering Paul does.

Third, it is important to note the differences between Pauline and Stoic thought. Stoic philosopher Epictetus argued that a sufferer must be impassible in their suffering, remaining true to themselves even as they are attacked from the outside (Bertschman 2020, 256–275). We do not see this sort of emphasis in Paul. Additionally, Epictetus does not see suffering as necessary the way we see in Paul (Bertschman 2020, 256–275).

Fourth, we might add that in Pauline thought the listing of sufferings as credentials is distinctly ironic. Suffering is not a qualification for Paul because it shows how strong or impassible he is in suffering. Instead suffering qualifies him precisely because it shows his weakness and humility, emphasizing God's strength. Matt O'Reilly (2021, 80–95) gives arguments for seeing Paul in 2 Corinthians as distinguishing himself from what the Corinthians would have expected leadership to be in a Greco-Roman context. He reconstructs the Corinthians as expecting not a Stoic, impassible leader, but a strong leader not experience suffering.

Fifth, and most importantly, if Paul's listing of his suffering did not have some basis in reality, we wonder how effective the letter would have been. If Paul had not suffered, to what extent could he convince the Corinthians that he had? They would have been aware of the Hellenistic Philosophy trope. Paul also references the Corinthians' suffering, in 2 Corinthians 1, and it is doubtful that he would describe their suffering hyperbolically to them. In our view, it is unlikely that Paul would have pointed to his suffering as evidence of his greater credentials than the super-apostles if his suffering was not that great. The Corinthian correspondence's defense of suffering does not fit a context of Paul making up his suffering, or a context of suffering being experienced by everyone.

For these reasons, we argue that Free (2017, 80–85) overstates the case and that the rhetoric of the Corinthian correspondence does not make sense if Paul's suffering is entirely fictional rhetoric. To conclude this section, Paul connects his apostleship with his ministry. Paul argues against the idea that his suffering disqualifies his credentials and ironically lists his various sufferings alongside his credentials.

3. Suffering and Empathy

The third way Paul sees suffering as a qualification for ministry is in the way it equips him with empathy. 2 Corinthians opens by describing the “Father of mercies and God of all comfort” (2 Cor 1:3). Paul notes that because God comforts him in his affliction, he can (δύνασθαι) comfort others in affliction, “with the *same comfort*” he received from God (2 Cor 1:4). Paul’s experience of suffering is the very tool he uses in his ministry. To use modern terms, Paul is saying that he does not just have *sympathy* for the Corinthians’ suffering (imagining what it is like and feeling bad for them), but *empathy* for their suffering (knowing what it is like from personal experience). Because he has made it through suffering to comfort, he can share that comfort with the Corinthians. If the super-apostles were questioning Paul’s ministry because of his suffering, Paul makes a practical counter-argument. Suffering enhances his ministry because it enables him to have empathy with the Corinthians who are themselves suffering and in need of comfort.

Paul continues, “For as we share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings, so through Christ, we share abundantly in comfort too. If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort” (2 Cor 1:5-7). “Christ’s sufferings” can alternatively be translated as “Messianic sufferings/woes.” Scholarship has recognized the importance of seeing Paul in the context of Jewish Apocalypticism. Apocalypticism was the idea that the present age was so marred by sin that it could not simply be fixed but needed to be replaced completely by the age to come, with the advent of the Messiah. Before the new age arrived, it was thought that the people of God would experience oppression, referred to as the “Messianic Woes,” or “Messianic Tribulation.”³

In 2 Corinthians 1, suffering originates with the believer’s solidarity with Christ. The Messiah suffered and his followers must suffer as well. But this solidarity with the Messiah also provides comfort and an equipping for a ministry of comfort to others. Paul sees solidarity not just between Christ and believers, but between believers and other believers, as they suffer together. This idea of union with Christ extending beyond the individual believer to the corporate Church resurfaces in 1:21, “it is God who establishes us with you in Christ.” Suffering enables empathy with those who suffer, so in this sense, suffering trains the apostle for ministry.

3 For an important introduction to the concept and its importance, see Dubis 2002.

3.1. 1 Peter

Here we turn to examine resonances between what we have seen in Paul's thought, with other texts of the New Testament.⁴ In 1 Peter and other texts, we will see resonances with the first Pauline concept of suffering as honorary title and qualification, and potentially the idea of empathy. Then in Hebrews, we will see resonances with the idea of empathy as training for ministry.

In 1 Peter we see ideas similar to the Pauline ideas of suffering as giving a leader authority, and of suffering as enabling solidarity. 1 Peter 5:1 reads, "So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you." There is much here in common with what we saw in Paul. "τῶν τοῦ χριστοῦ παθημάτων" is nearly identical to the phrase in 2 Corinthians 1:5. Here as in 2 Corinthians, the phrase could be translated "Messianic sufferings" instead of "sufferings of Christ."⁵ We also see Peter exercising authority and making commands, but doing so in a humble way as he stresses his solidarity with them and his partaking in suffering. Part of his credentials are suffering, and this suffering gives him solidarity with those he is speaking with. Of note as well is Revelation 1:9, John introduces himself, "I, John, your brother and partner (συγκοινωνός) in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus." Like Peter, John stresses less what is different about him and his disciples, and more what they have in common through suffering. He also strikingly identifies the location of the suffering (as well as the kingdom and endurance) as *in* Jesus.

3.2. Hebrews

The author of Hebrews also sees suffering as a qualification for ministry because it enables empathy, though from a different perspective. Hebrews makes the shocking statement that it was fitting, even necessary that Christ be "made perfect through suffering" (Heb 2:10, 17). To be able (δύναται) to be a merciful high priest, he had to suffer and be tempted, so he could help those who suffer and are tempted (Heb 2:18). Later in the letter the author returns to this theme, noting that Christ is a high priest who can sympathize with his peoples' weaknesses (Heb 4:15). The author then discusses how high priests, in general, can deal gently with their people, themselves being beset with weakness (Heb 5:2). The difference, of course, is that Christ does not have to make sacrifices for his sins since he is

4 For introductions to issues in the study of persecution in 1 Peter, see Williams 2012.

5 For extensive argumentation, see Dubis 2002. One thing he notes is that Peter did not directly witness the cross, and so it is likely that he here speaks of witnessing other believers suffer. See especially pp. 5–36.

without sin. Nevertheless, his suffering was real – “In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered” (Heb 5:7-8). This obedience of Christ specifically as a son is applied to the believer generally toward the end of the letter, “have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? “My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives” (Heb 12:5-6, quoting Prov 3:11-12). The author of Hebrews also commands a ministry of empathy to all believers, “Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body” (Heb 13:3). Believers do not *need* to be made like their brothers in every way like Christ. The command here is not to *enter* into prison. The author also notes that the recipients of the letter have not yet shed blood in their faithfulness to Christ (Heb 12:4), and he does not tell them to seek out such a situation. But even if *experiential* empathy is not commanded, the author does command the hearers to put themselves in the shoes of their fellow believers, for the sake of solidarity. Hebrews promotes empathy based on the solidarity and union believers already have, being “in the body” (Heb 13:3). In chapter 10 of the letter, the author notes that the recipients have recently fallen from their former faith when they “endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one” (Heb 10:32-34).

Here we see similarities with Paul’s thought, namely that suffering can provide empathy and solidarity for ministry. But there are also significant differences of emphasis. The first is the direction of the solidarity. Paul can sometimes talk of Christ becoming like the believer when Christ suffers. Christ died for the ungodly (Rom 5:6), became a servant (Phil 2:6), and was made to be sin though he knew no sin (2 Cor 5:21). In all these texts we see Christ entering into solidarity with humanity. But by far the more common move for Paul to make is to see solidarity going in the other direction with believers entering into solidarity with Christ. Christ died *for* believers - but for all the spiritual benefits this entails, it does not mean that believers will immediately avoid physical death. Being united to Christ can entail *more* suffering for the believer as they enter into burial with Christ before being raised with him (see also, Rom 6:4, Col 2:12. This insight comes from Andrew Rillera). Believers become more like Christ through suffering. In 2 Corinthians 1 the “Christ sufferings” are seen as something already existing, applied, and abounding to the believer. The believer suffers because they have to be made like Christ in every way.

In both Hebrews and Paul, Christ is an example of suffering for the believer. But again, a different reason for suffering is given. In Hebrews, believers suffer as they are disciplined for sin to become more perfect. Christ similarly suffers to be “made perfect.”⁶ In Paul, Christ is also an example of the sufferer, but a reason for suffering is not given. Christ and believers suffer because this is necessary in the current (final) age.

The second difference between Hebrews and Paul here is that Paul does not seem to make as much use of the theology of suffering as fatherly *discipline* (Bertschman 2020, 256–275 also notes this, pointing to Romans 5 as the only place that Paul connects suffering with growth in virtue). God the Father is present in the suffering of the believers (2 Cor 1). But here in 2 Corinthians 1, the goal is not to connect the suffering with sin (this is a move made elsewhere by Paul, for instance in 1 Cor 5:5; 1 Tim 1:20).

Paul does see sinners as suffering, even using some of the same language for believing and unbelieving sufferers. But Paul discusses suffering in unbelievers’ lives less as instruction and more as judgment. It is *mercy and patience* (delaying judgment) that Paul points out as instructive for sufferers. In the suffering discussed in 2 Corinthians 1, the focus is not on sin but solidarity and comfort. Here it is 1 Peter that is closer to Paul. 1 Peter makes a distinction between unbelieving and believing sufferers, between those suffering for sin and suffering for being Christian (1 Pet 4:16).

Conclusion

Understanding Paul’s interpretation of his life experience and the way he and his community respond is a vital topic in Pauline interpretation. This article has attempted to outline Paul’s thought process regarding suffering and how it relates to ministry. Paul sees suffering as a qualification for ministry first as he is imprisoned for Christ. Paul takes a humiliating reality and makes it an honorary title. Second, Paul sees himself as a suffering apostle. Paul does not just retain his apostolic authority despite suffering, but in fact through it. Thirdly, Paul sees suffering as a qualification for ministry as one who can empathize with those experiencing similar suffering. Through suffering, Paul is being trained to minister to those who are currently or will in the future suffer.

Reference List

Anderson, Garwood P. 2016. *Paul’s New Perspective: Charting a Soteriological Journey*. Downers Grove: IVP Academic.

6 For Jesus as co-sufferer in Hebrews, see Hall 2021.

- Bertschmann, Dorothea H. 2020. "What Does Not Kill Me Makes Me Stronger": Paul and Epictetus on the Correlation of Virtues and Suffering. *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 82/2: 256–275.
- Capes, David, ed. 2024. *Pastoral Implications of Pseudepigraphy and Anonymity in the New Testament*. Eugene: Wipf & Stock.
- Davey, Wesley Thomas. 2019. Playing Christ: Participation and Suffering in the Letters of Paul. *Currents in Biblical Research* 17/3: 306–331.
- Dempster, Stephen G. 2007. The Servant of the Lord. In: Scott J. Hafemann, Paul R. House, eds. *Central Themes in Biblical Theology: Mapping Unity in Diversity*, 128–178. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
- Dubis, Mark. 2002. *Messianic Woes in 1 Peter: Suffering and Eschatology in 1 Peter 4:12-19*. Lausanne: Peter Lang.
- Duff, Paul B. 2015. *Moses in Corinth: The Apologetic Context of 2 Corinthians 3*. Supplements to Novum Testamentum 159. Leiden: Brill.
- Free, Marian. 2017. Suffering in Paul: A Case for Exaggeration. *St Mark's Review* 239: 75–92.
- Hafemann, Scott J. 2000a. A Call to Pastoral Suffering: The Need for Recovering Paul's Model of Ministry in 2 Corinthians. *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 4/2: 22–36.
- Hafemann, Scott J. 2000b. *Suffering and Ministry in the Spirit: Paul's Defense of His Ministry in II Corinthians 2:14-3:3*. Paternoster Biblical and Theological Monographs. Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster.
- Hafemann, Scott J. 1989. The Comfort and Power of the Gospel: The Argument of 2 Corinthians 1-3. *Review & Expositor* 86/3: 325–344.
- Hall, Josiah D. 2021. Amidst Affliction: God's Responses to Suffering According to the Mekhilta and Hebrews. *Presbyterion* 47/2: 123–131.
- Hamilton, James M. Jr. 2013. Suffering in Revelation: The Fulfillment of the Messianic Woes. *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 17/4: 34–47.
- Maroney, Nathan. 2023. Pauline Perspectives on Persecution. *Global Missiology* 20/4: 41–47.
- Moss, Candida. 2014. *The Myth of Persecution*. NY: HarperOne.
- O'Reilly, Matt. 2022. Paul, Apostle of Pain: "One of Us-Ness" and the Question of Suffering in 2 Corinthians. *Journal of Early Christian History* 12/1: 80–95.
- Tabb, Brian J. 2019. It's a Hard Knock Life: Paul and Seneca on Suffering. In: Joseph R. Dodson, David E. Briones, and John M. G. Barclay, eds. *Paul and the Giants of Philosophy: Reading the Apostle in Greco-Roman Context*, 146–154. Downers Grove: IVP.

- Wright, N. T. 2008. *Colossians and Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary*. Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press.
- Williams, Travis B. 2012. *Persecution in 1 Peter: Differentiating and Contextualizing Early Christian Suffering*. Supplements to Novum Testamentum, V. 145. Leiden & Boston: Brill.

Nathan Maroney

Patnja kao kvalifikacija za službu

Sažetak

Za Pavla su stvarnosti Krista i evanđelja bile moćni interpretativni alati. U svojim pismima Pavao koristi te stvarnosti kao leće kojima tumači svoje trpljenje. Ovaj članak istražuje elemente Pavlova razmišljanja u kojemu je patnja protumačena kao nešto što ide u prilog službi. Prvo, u Efežanima i Filemonu raspravljamo o terminu „sužanj Krista Isusa“ i načine na koje Pavao to vidi kao počasni naziv koji ga kvalificira autoritetom. Drugo, u korespondenciji s Korinćanima razmatramo način na koji Pavao povezuje apostolstvo i patnju, nabrajajući svoje nedaće kao kvalifikacije. Treće, u Drugoj poslanici Korinćanima promatramo način na koji Pavao vidi patnju kao nešto što doprinosi empatiji u službi. Na kraju otkrivamo odjeke sličnih misli drugdje u Novomu zavjetu.