

A Call to Pastoral Suffering: The Need for Recovering Paul's Model of Ministry in 2 Corinthians¹

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Introduction

Though there are exceptions, the contemporary landscape of the American evangelical Church is flat. Instead of rising above our surroundings, our worship is anemic, filled with emotion but little life-changing gravity. Our discipleship is wrong-headed, focusing on meeting the felt needs of the Self, with little regard for meeting our real need to know God more profoundly. Our goals in life are idolatrous, deriving from a health-and-wealth gospel of family life, social status, and retirement, with little thought of laying down our lives for the sake of the kingdom. David Wells rightly says, "The fundamental problem in the evangelical world today is that God rests too inconsequential upon the church. His truth is too distant, his grace is too ordinary, his judgment is too benign, his gospel is too easy, and his Christ is too common."²

One of the central reasons we find ourselves in this crisis is that our pastoral leadership no longer has a clear conception of its calling. In place of the biblical portrait of the shepherd who embodies the gospel by laying down his life for God's people, we have substituted a teddy bear, CEO, or therapist model of the pastor. The pastor has become someone who dispenses comfort without the cross, who "manages" the church rather than models Christ, and who helps us feel good about ourselves rather than mediating the glory of God revealed in his Word. It is

easy to see why this is the case, given the powerful cultural forces that are at work behind the contemporary redefinition of the pastoral office. As Hauerwas and Willimon insightfully point out,

One can readily understand why pastors are so ready to take up the general description of being one of the "helping professions." After all, most of us professing Christians, from the liberals to the fundamentalists, remain practical atheists in most of our lives. This is so because we think the church is sustained by the "services" it provides or the amount of "fellowship" and "good feeling" in the congregation. Of course there is nothing wrong with "services" and "good feeling"; what is wrong is that they have become ends in themselves. When that happens the church and the ministry cannot avoid sentimentality, which we believe is the most detrimental corruption of the church today.

Sentimentality, after all, is but the way our unbelief is lived out. Sentimentality, that attitude of being always ready to understand but not to judge, corrupts us and the ministry. This is as true of conservative churches as it is of liberal. . . . Without God, without the One whose death on the cross challenges all our "good feelings," who stands beyond and over against our human anxieties, all we have left is sentiment, the saccharine residue of theism in demise.³

We are Corinthians

This reconfiguration of the pastor is nothing new. Timothy Savage has shown that in Paul's day Greco-Roman society

also stressed (1) a rugged individualism that valued self-sufficiency; (2) wealth as the key to one's status within society; (3) a self-display of one's accomplishments and possessions in order to win praise from others; (4) a competition for honor that viewed boasting as its natural corollary; and (5) a pride in one's neighborhood as a reflection of one's social location.⁴ These values combined to create a populace for which self-appreciation became the goal and self-gratification the reward. Moreover, all of this was fueled by a drive for upward social mobility by advancing economically. For with wealth came other significant markers of social advancement, such as reputation, occupation, neighborhood, education, religious status, political involvement, and athletic achievement. In short, the culture was openly materialistic in its quest for praise and esteem.

In such a milieu, the vast majority of religious people had no interest in theology. Their religion had little content, apart from the rituals needed to influence the deity. Consequently, the various cults and temples seldom clashed, since experience, not ideas, drove religion. Since all religious experience was fundamentally the same, toleration was practiced. Most people, regardless of what religion they practiced, sought salvation from suffering, power in daily life, and entertainment. As a group, first century worshippers, regardless of their religious affiliation, wanted "health, wealth, protection and sustenance, not moral transformation."⁵ Religious services, like other social gatherings, were simply ways to gain fellowship, especially as they revolved around lavish banquets. Indeed, regardless of one's religion of choice, "the cults seemed to exact little appreciable change in a

convert's manner of life . . . religion served not as a critic of, but as a warrant for, society. It uplifted, entertained, prospered and confirmed those it was designated to serve."⁶

As children of this culture, the Corinthians were easy prey for Paul's opponents. After all, his opponents came with flashy and entertaining rhetorical power, a track record of "success" in other churches testified to by letters of recommendation, and a stress on signs and wonders. Moreover, they promised "more" of the Spirit to those who would show their sincerity by giving them money!

The Antidote to Atheism: A Suffering Apostle

As the antidote to this atheism of sentimentality, with its implicit health-and-wealth gospel driven by materialism and a search for social status, God sent Paul to suffer as an apostle of the crucified Christ, carrying his treasure in a "jar of clay" (4:7). Paul did not represent Christ, embody the gospel he preached, or mediate the power of the Spirit through great displays of rhetorical power, political savvy, and personal strength, but by *suffering* (cf. Acts 9:16; 1 Cor 2:1-5). 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). Or in the words of Paul in 2 Corinthians 2:14, God was "*always leading us to death* in Christ like a prisoner in a Roman triumphal procession." As he says elsewhere, "I *die* every day" (1 Cor 15:31).

Paul's point is as simple as it is profound. Rather than calling his sufficiency into question, Paul's suffering, pictured under the metonymy of "death," is the revelatory vehicle through which the knowledge of God, manifest in the cross

of Christ and in the power of the Spirit, is disclosed (cf. 1:3-11, 2:14-17; 4:7-12, 6:3-10, 11:23b-33, 12:9-10, 13:4). God uses Paul's suffering,⁷ as the embodiment of the crucified Christ, as the instrument to display his resurrection power (cf. too 1 Cor 2:2-5; 4:9; 1 Thess 1:5). This revelation took place in two ways. Occasionally God rescued Paul from adversity when it was overwhelming, as in 2 Corinthians 1:8-11 (cf. Phil 2:25-30). More often, however, God used these prior acts of deliverance to strengthen Paul's faith so that he might *endure* his suffering *with thanksgiving to the glory of God* (4:7-12; 6:3-10; 12:9; 13:4; cf. 2 Tim 2:10).

Thus, Paul's call to suffer as an apostle is the very means by which God makes his love and power known in the world *for the proclamation and praise of his glory* (1:3, 11, 20; 3:8-11; 4:4-6; 4:15; 9:11-15). If Paul's suffering is the means of God's self-revelation, then the manifestation of God's glory is its ultimate goal. Moreover, Paul affirms that whenever God's people, by trusting in God's love, power, and promises, endure the same sufferings to which he was called as an apostle, they too manifest the power and glory of God in the midst of their adversity (1:7).

God's goal in suffering, therefore, is to teach us that, in life and in death (as in all eternity), God himself is all we ultimately

need. God never intends to destroy his people, nor will he allow anyone or anything else to do so. Nor can anything separate us from the love of God in Christ (Rom 8:31-39). In placing Paul in a situation in which he despaired even of life itself (1:8), the only thing God destroyed was Paul's self-confidence. In return, Paul received God himself. In response, Paul gave God praise.

In the three thesis statements of 1 Corinthians 4:9, 2 Corinthians 2:14, and 4:11, Paul therefore gives the *theological* basis for his conviction that his suffering, like the "death of Jesus," mediates the resurrection power of God, i.e., the "life of Jesus." Here Paul asserts that his sufferings are not merely coincidental, but are part of the divine plan for the spread of the gospel, since God's power is expressed *through* Paul's weakness.

Moreover, with the death of Christ as its backdrop, these passages portray Paul's suffering under the imagery of "death." In two of the passages this is done by means of a metaphor (1 Cor 4:9: being sentenced to death in the arena; 2 Cor 2:14: being led to death in the triumphal procession). In 2 Corinthians 4:11, Paul explicitly associates his suffering with the death of Jesus itself. In each case, Paul views his suffering to be a divinely orchestrated "death" that, like the cross of Christ, performs a revelatory function.

2 Cor 4:11a	2 Cor 2:14a	1 Cor 4:9a
1. Divine Passive	1. Thanks be to God	1. God
2. Constantly (cf. "always" in v. 10a)	2. always	2. (cf. "until the present hour," v. 11, and "until now," v. 13)
3. we the living	3. us	3. us apostles
4. are being handed over to death	4. leads us in a triumphal procession to death	4. exhibited last of all as those sentenced to death
5. on account of Christ	5. in Christ	5. (cf. "on account of Christ," v. 10)

2 Cor 4:11b

1. in order that the life of Jesus might be revealed
2. in our mortal flesh
3. —

2 Cor 2:14b

1. and reveals the fragrance of the knowledge of him
2. through us
3. in every place

1 Cor 4:9b

1. because we became a spectacle
2. —
3. to the world, that is, to angels and to men

Thus Paul's message and manner of life were one. For this reason, Paul could say about himself the same thing he said about the gospel. The parallels between 1 Corinthians 1:17-18 and 2 Corinthians 2:14-16a make clear that as the "aroma of Christ," Paul's *suffering* brings about the same two-fold effect caused by his *proclamation* of the cross of Christ! To accept or reject Paul is to accept or reject Christ himself.

Hence, for Paul, the cross of Christ

The Message of the Gospel in the Life of the Apostle

God's purpose in leading Paul into circumstances of suffering was not to kill Paul, at least not immediately. Instead, God brought Paul to the end of his life and then delivered him from his adversity (1:10a) *in order that* (note the *hina* + subjunctive in 2 Cor 1:9) from then on Paul would not rely on himself in any way, but only "on God, who raises the dead."

1. Paul is sent to preach in a mode that corresponds to the cross of Christ (1:17; ct. 2:1, 4)
2. For (*gar*) (18a)
3. the word of the cross
4. is foolishness to those who are perishing (18a)
5. to us who are being saved it is the power of God (18c)

1. Paul is "being led to death," which is a mode of existence that reveals the cross of Christ (2:14)
2. For (*hoti*) (15a)
3. we are an aroma of Christ to God (15a)
4. among those who are perishing...to those a fragrance from death to death (15c, 16a)
5. among those who are being saved...to those a fragrance from life to life (15b, 16a)

determined both the manner of his life and the content of his message. Moreover, his manner of life embodied and displayed his message. As a result, Paul recognized that his life and ministry functioned to further the process of salvation ("life") and judgment ("death") in the lives of others. To reject Paul and his message as "foolishness" was a confirmation that one was already "perishing." To accept Paul and his message was a demonstration that the power of God was already at work to save.

Hence, this replay of Christ's "death" and "resurrection" in Paul's own life led Paul to be confident that God could be trusted to deliver him in the future (1:10-11a). As a result, the experiences of Christ and Paul became "video clip" illustrations of God's trustworthy purposes, power, and promises. From the experience of Christ and the apostle, God's people are comforted by knowing that what God did for Christ and Paul, he will do for them as well if they follow in their footsteps of faith (1:6-7).

The series of four adversative contrasts

in 2 Corinthians 4:8-9 illustrate *how* this divine power comes to expression in Paul's life. *In spite of* Paul's being "hard pressed," *nevertheless* he is not "crushed;" he is "perplexed, *but* not in despair," etc. Paul attributes his ability to withstand suffering and persecution to God's ability or "power" to sustain him in the midst of adversity. These four contrasts confirm that the "power" manifested in the "treasure" of the gospel ministry belongs to God. Given Paul's weakness, his perseverance can only be attributed to God. Paul's suffering provides the platform for the display of God's power.

Through his experience of suffering and sustenance, Paul mediates the knowledge of God to the world by embodying Jesus' death and resurrection:

<i>the dying of Jesus</i>	<i>the life of Jesus</i>
hard pressed	but not crushed
perplexed	but not in despair
persecuted	but not abandoned
struck down	but not destroyed

Moreover, the verb translated "[not] in despair" in 2 Corinthians 4:8 (*exaporoumenoi*) is the same word found in 2 Corinthians 1:8, where Paul recounts that in the past he *did* despair of his life. This move from 2 Corinthians 1:8 to 4:8 shows that Paul learned his lesson in Asia! God proved himself faithful to rescue his people. And God's rescue of Paul in the *past* gave him confidence that God could and would rescue him in the *future*, so that this hope enabled Paul to endure in the *present* (cf. 1:8-10). Within this framework, the reference to not being "abandoned" (*enkataleipomenoi*) in 4:9 is especially significant. Its background in the LXX indicates that this is a "divine passive" that speaks of being abandoned *by God* (cf. Gen

28:15; Deut 31:6, 8; 1 Chron 28:20; Ps 15:10; 36:25, 28; Sir 2:10).⁸ Just as God did not ultimately abandon Jesus in the grave, so too God's resurrection power sustains Paul in his own experiences of "death." The contrasts of 4:8-9 underscore that during this evil age it is endurance *in the midst of* adversity, not immediate, miraculous deliverance *from* it, that reveals most profoundly the power of God. Paul's deliverance in Asia (1:8-10) leads to the daily endurance of 4:8-9.

Anyone can worship the "Santa Claus" of the health and wealth gospel (if you are nice and not naughty [i.e., if you have enough "faith"], he will give you what you really want: a good family, material security, and a long life that is free of sickness!). But Paul's willingness and ability to endure in the midst of adversity for the sake of Christ and on behalf of Christ's people demonstrate the surpassing worth of knowing Christ (Phil 3:8-11) and the incomparable value of our life with Christ in the age to come (2 Cor 4:16-18; Rom 8:18). The ultimate testimony to God's power and glory is the praise that arises in the midst of affliction. This praise arises because of our conviction that God is at work in and through our suffering for a future good in his presence that is so great that all present suffering seems merely "light and momentary" (4:17). Moreover, our endurance with praise now testifies that knowing God and being conformed to Christ's image is *already* of more value than anything the world has to offer!

This is why, in 2 Corinthians 6:3-10, Paul explicitly teaches that it is not his suffering itself, but his great endurance in the graces of 2 Corinthians 6:6-7a, in the midst of every kind of adverse and positive circumstance (2 Cor 6:4), that commends him as a servant of God. As such,

Paul's catalogues of suffering in 2 Corinthians 6:3-10 and 11:23-33 delineate the *way* in which Paul "works together" with God in making the appeal of the gospel to be reconciled to God (2 Cor 5:18-6:2). Paul's life as an apostle is the product of God's "resurrection" power and presence (cf. the references to the "Holy Spirit" and the "power of God" in 6:6-7).

It is crucial to keep in mind, therefore, that Paul's call to suffer as an apostle was not a call to a joyless, second-rate existence marked by having to "give up things" for God. The call to suffer for Paul is not a call to a self-pitying sacrifice, but a call to enter into the joy and glory of Christ and his kingdom. Those whom God calls to suffer on behalf of others as an extension of Christ's love are not being called to masochism, but to a mission. What distinguishes the suffering of the righteous from the suffering rampant in the world is the transforming power of God's sustaining presence in their lives. They are not summoned to be miserable for God (God transforms their suffering into a platform for profound joy!), but to be a mediator for the world. Self-denial for Christ's sake is not a sacrifice, but the pathway to gaining life itself (cf. Mark 8:34-38).

This is borne out by the parallel between 2 Corinthians 4:17 and 1:8. As compared to his experience described in 1:8, Paul was no longer despairing when perplexed in 2 Corinthians 4:8. Moreover, just as Paul has grown to trust God to sustain him under the "weight" of his afflictions (1:8 with 4:8), so too Paul has come to see that the "weight" of God's glory far surpasses that of his afflictions (1:8 with 4:17). "The affliction which once felt like a lethal weight round his neck now seems weightless in comparison to his eternal

load of glory."⁹

If Paul's suffering is a sign that the kingdom of God has *not yet* been consummated, his endurance is evidence that it *has been* inaugurated. The power of the new creation (4:6) is being mediated in the midst of this evil age (4:3) through Paul's suffering (4:7-11), which is itself an expression of God's triumph over Satan. Indeed, the power of the Spirit unleashed in the preaching of the gospel is so great and its glory so profound that it must be carried in a "pot," lest people put their trust in Paul himself (cf. 1 Cor 2:1-5).

The Call to take up the Cross

Jesus' words in Mark 8:34-35, in the context of Jesus' own call to the cross, make it clear that trusting in the gospel of the kingdom (Mark 1:14-15) expresses itself in a cruciform life of discipleship. But "taking up one's cross" does not mean putting up with hassles and suffering in life. It refers to following in Jesus' footsteps by considering the needs of others more important than one's own. In Jesus' case this led him to giving his life as a ransom for the lives of his people (Mark 10:45). In our case, based on what Jesus has done for us (note the grounding function of Mark 10:32-34 and 45), it means seeking to be great in the kingdom by becoming a slave to the needs of others (Mark 10:35-44).

This is why Paul could commend himself as an apostle by pointing to the fact that he preached "Jesus Christ as Lord" and himself as the Corinthians' "slave" for Jesus' sake (4:5). Both of these can only come about as a result of the Spirit's work of transforming one into the image of God as revealed in Christ (1 Cor 12:3, 7; 2 Cor 3:18; 4:4-6). Paul's message and manner of life were testimonies to the power and

gifting of the Spirit (3:4-6).

Because he was called to suffer as an embodiment of his gospel, and because he had learned that trusting God in the midst of that suffering is the pathway to his own joy and deliverance, Paul was not dissuaded from following Jesus by his circumstantial suffering. Rather, Paul took up the cross *himself* by *willingly* considering others' need for Christ more important than his own needs for sustenance and peace, although this meant, as a by-product, even more suffering in his life.

As a result, Paul's greatest sufferings were not the illnesses he suffered or the dangers he encountered on his worldwide missionary travels. Rather, Paul's greatest afflictions, like those of Christ, were *voluntary*. He endured the hardships and scorn because of his willingness to give up his right to financial support for the sake of his churches (1 Cor 4:12; 9:15-23; 15:10; 2 Cor 2:17; 11:7-9, 23, 27; 12:14; 1 Thess 2:9; 2 Thess 3:8). He received persecution because of his commitment to preach the gospel to Jews and Gentiles alike (see below). Worst of all (!), he was plagued by anxiety daily because of his concern for his churches (11:28).

It is indeed striking that in 2 Corinthians 11:23-33, Paul's catalog of affliction reaches its climax not with any of his circumstantial sufferings, but with a reference to the "daily . . . pressure of [his] concern for all the churches" (v. 28). This too is part of Paul's apostolic suffering, since the pressure Paul feels is brought about by his identification with the weak and by his indignation over those who lead others into sin (v. 29). Normally such concern or anxiety (*merimna*) is considered negative, since it expresses a lack of confidence in God's care and a lack of satisfaction in God's provision (cf.

Phil 4:6; 1 Cor 7:32-34; Mark 4:19; Matt 6:25-34; 1 Pet 5:7).

In these cases, however, the anxiety is directed toward *oneself*. Paul's anxiety, in contrast, is not for himself, but for the welfare of others as an expression of his love (cf. the expressions of concern in Phil 2:20; 1 Cor 12:25). The Corinthians must have realized that in this context he was talking about them! And Paul is emphatic in stressing that his continual concern over the Corinthians, which has been a recurrent theme throughout the letter, is more difficult than any of his physical sufferings (cf. 1:6; 2:4; 2:12-13; 4:12, 15; 7:3, 5; 11:2; 12:20-21; 13:9).

In addition to carrying this emotional burden, Paul, like Christ, also considered the needs of his people for the gospel more important than his own physical comfort and personal reputation (cf. Phil 2:1-11). So, Paul gave up his status as a Jew, his right to be paid, and his concern for his own physical welfare. He did so for the sake of proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and to remove any possibility that the gospel could be misconstrued as something he sold as part of his career as a public speaker (1 Cor 9:15-23; 2 Cor 2:17). Paul did not want his churches to base their faith on his performance and persona, but on the power of God (1 Cor 2:1-5). Paul consequently labored day and night in order to support himself while he preached (cf. e.g., Acts 20:9-11, 31), though the uncertainties of his work and travel meant days of hunger and thirst. Moreover, the social status of such artisans was less than desirable (cf. 1 Cor 4:11-13).

Paul's "sleeplessness" in 2 Corinthians 11:27 could, therefore, refer to the late nights he spent writing and studying, as well as to the consequence of his pressing concern for his churches.¹⁰ And Paul's ref-

erence to his being “naked” in 11:27 is probably a metaphor representing the consequent social shame of being afflicted and disgraced, which Paul certainly was in the eyes of the world (1 Cor 4:13; 2 Cor 6:8; cf. Gen 2:25; 3:7-11; Ezek 16:8; Nah 3:5; Mic 1:11; Rev 3:18).¹¹ But here too, what others considered shameful Paul *boasts in* as authenticating signs of his calling and commitment to the ministry.

Likewise, the various arrests, imprisonments, and punishments referred to in 2 Corinthians 11:23-26 were suffered as an apostle for the gospel (cf. 6:5; Acts 16:23-30). Paul’s more severe beatings (v. 23) refer both to the Jewish punishment of “39 lashes” (v. 24) and to the Gentile punishment of being beaten with rods (v. 25a). Five times Paul received this synagogue punishment, which, among other things, was inflicted for false teaching, blasphemy, and seriously breaking the Law. It was the most severe beating Scripture allowed (cf. Deut 25:1-3). The frequency of the beatings attests to Paul’s continued strategic focus on the synagogues. Indeed, he was even stoned at Lystra (cf. Acts 14:5-19), the most common form of execution in the Bible.¹² At the same time, Paul’s ministry as the Jewish apostle to the Gentiles caused rifts within both the Jewish and Gentile social fabric as a whole. Hence, three times the Romans punished Paul for disturbing the peace by beating him with rods, a form of punishment usually reserved for non-citizens and slaves (11:25a; cf. 1 Thess 2:2; Acts 16:22-23, 35-38; 22:25-29).

These public punishments reveal yet another way in which Paul *willingly* suffered as a result of considering the needs of others more important than his own. God’s leading Paul into situations of “death” was matched by Paul’s own tak-

ing up of the cross. Paul repeatedly went to the Jews first with the gospel, even though they often convicted him of false teaching and/or breaking the Law for his witness to Jesus as the Messiah and for his ministry among the Gentiles (cf. Acts 9:20; 13:5, 14-43; 14:1; 17:1-3, 10-21; 18:4, 19; 19:8).¹³

That Paul submitted to these punishments rather than separating himself from the Jewish community is itself an indication of his self-understanding as an apostle and of his amazing love for his people (cf. Rom 1:16; Rom 9:2-3). Because he took up the cross on behalf of both Jews and Gentiles, Paul suffered both for his mission to the Gentiles and for his continued commitment to his own people (cf. 1 Cor 9:19-23).

Boasting in Weakness

Since Paul was called to embody his message of the cross and resurrection in a “jar of clay,” Paul’s argument for the legitimacy of his apostolic ministry concludes with the principle stated in 2 Corinthians 11:30 and then repeated in 12:9-10: if forced to boast, Paul will do so concerning his weaknesses, since they are the platform for God’s power.

At first, the subsequent recounting of Paul’s experience in Damascus in 2 Corinthians 11:32-33 seems out of place. Paul grounds his commitment to boast only in his weaknesses in this story in view of the fact that his flight *from* Damascus was the initial and foundational example of his newly granted weakness as an apostle. As such, it stands in stark contrast to the strength in which he had originally left *for* Damascus to persecute the believers. The one who left for Damascus to persecute Christians left Damascus as a persecuted Christian! Given the

fact that Paul's weakness is now his strength, this experience also provided the platform for his increasing "power" in regard to preaching Jesus as the Christ (cf. Acts 9:16 and 22).

Paul's narrow escape in Damascus, like his despairing even of life (cf. 1:8-11), served as a stage for highlighting God's deliverance and sustenance. From the very beginning of his new life as an apostle, it thus formed a foundation for Paul's calling to suffer for the sake of Christ and the gospel. Paul's litany of suffering in 11:23-29 is nothing new; weakness was the contour of Paul's calling from the very beginning of his apostleship.¹⁴

In the same way, Paul buttresses the restatement of his commitment to boast only in his weakness in 2 Corinthians 12:9b-10 by recounting in 12:1-9a his experience with his "thorn in the flesh." Because of the great magnitude and magnificence of his revelations,¹⁵ Paul knew that to boast in his visions, like his opponents were doing, would lead to exalting himself in a way that would cut the very heart itself out of the gospel (12:7a). Nevertheless, Paul's restraint was not the result of his own moral willpower. In 2 Corinthians 12:7b, Paul makes it clear that God himself kept Paul from such conceit by granting him "a thorn in (or against) his flesh," i.e., "a messenger of Satan" that was sent to batter or torment him. Once again, Paul uses the divine passive in this verse: "there was given me (*by God*) a thorn in my flesh . . ." Both Paul's rapture *and* his thorn are the work of God! As Ralph Martin observes, "The importance of the passive verb, *edothē*, 'was given,' can hardly be exaggerated. God is the unseen agent behind the bitter experience."¹⁶

The exact nature of this "thorn" or

Satanic messenger (literally: "angel of Satan") has been a matter of great debate. Though I am convinced that the "thorn" refers to Paul's physical illness, not his opponents, for our purposes its exact nature need not detain us. Indeed, Paul's own silence in 2 Corinthians 12:7 concerning the nature of his "thorn" is intentional. What concerns Paul is the "thorn's" theological origin (i.e., it is sent by Satan, but given by God), its cause (i.e., it is given because of Paul's great revelations), and its purpose (namely, to afflict Paul in order to keep him from becoming conceited).

Hence, rather than calling his divinely granted authority into question, Paul's ongoing weakness is *itself* proof of the revelations granted to him as an apostle, since they are the *ground* for his receiving a thorn in the flesh. In 2 Corinthians 12:7, Paul therefore turns his opponents' argument on its head. The more they call attention to the severity of Paul's weaknesses as a "sick charismatic," the more they themselves point to the exalted nature of his revelations!

At first, Paul reacted to his "thorn in the flesh" as would be expected from one who knew of God's sovereignty over evil and of God's love for his children: he prayed that the Lord would remove the "thorn" (12:8). Paul is no Stoic who sees the thorn as an opportunity for self-mastery and endurance. Nor is he a theological masochist who glorifies in suffering itself. When suffering hits, Paul prays for deliverance. That Paul did so "three times" may simply be a conventional way to emphasize that the prayer was repeated (cf. Ps 55:17, where the psalmist utters his complaint three times a day).¹⁷ In this case, Paul is simply saying that he prayed repeatedly about the matter.

The problem with this reading is that Paul *stopped* praying after the third time! The reference to “three times” is therefore better taken as signaling an event that is now over and done with, having gone through its beginning, middle, and end.¹⁸ Read in this way, Paul’s threefold prayer parallels Jesus’ threefold prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, which also culminated in Jesus’ confidence that his prayer had been answered, *even though* the cup of suffering would remain (Mark 14:32-41).

God’s answer to Paul’s prayer in 2 Corinthians 12:9a and Paul’s response in 12:9b-10 form the conclusion both to Paul’s experience of his thorn in the flesh (vv. 7b-8), and to his refraining from boasting in his own “surpassingly great revelations” (vv. 5-7a). Instead of removing the thorn, Christ declared that his own grace will be sufficient for Paul in the midst of his suffering, since it is Paul’s weakness itself that provides the platform for perfecting the Lord’s power (v. 9a). Paul’s sufferings can never outstrip God’s supply (cf. 1:8-11). For this reason, Paul will “all the more gladly” boast in his weaknesses, instead of his revelations, in order that the power of Christ might dwell upon him (v. 9b; cf. 1:9-10; 11:30; 12:5).

As a result, the promise of God’s grace and power leads Paul to be pleased in his sufferings (v. 10a), rather than continuing to pray for their removal, because he now knows that “when” he is weak, “then” he is strong (v. 10b). *Thus, the revelation of Christ’s power in Paul’s weakness (v. 9b), and Paul’s consequent contentment (v. 10a), form the high point of Paul’s argument in this passage and, in doing so, provide a summary of the theological substructure of 2 Corinthians as a whole.* To comment on these verses is to risk detracting from their own profundity.

Paul’s use of the temple imagery in his reference in 2 Corinthians 12:9 to “Christ’s power resting on him” (literally: dwelling or making one’s abode; *episkēnōō*) recalls Paul’s earlier affirmation in 3:7-18 that, under the new covenant, the glory of God is being revealed in Christ without a veil. Here too Paul reflects on the contrast between his own ministry of the Spirit and the veiled glory on Moses’ face and in the tent of meeting, tabernacle, and temple (cf. Exod 25:8; 40:34; Ezek 37:27; 2 Cor 6:16; John 1:14; Rev 21:3). Christ’s declaration and Paul’s response in 2 Corinthians 12:9 are yet another affirmation that Paul is a mediator of God’s transforming presence under the new covenant ministry of the Spirit.

Whereas Paul was forbidden to speak about what he saw in heaven (12:4), he can quote Christ verbatim concerning what his life on earth is to be like (12:9). While Paul’s personal revelations are irrelevant for establishing his apostolic ministry, his suffering plays a strategic role. That which he sees in heaven is matched by what Paul suffers on earth. His silence over his revelations is broken only by his boast in his weakness. The strength of Paul’s visions remains “weak” when it comes to revealing God, while Paul’s weakness becomes the place of God’s power.

Instead of calling that ministry into question, Paul’s various weaknesses, listed in 11:23b-33 and now summarized in 12:10, are therefore his only legitimating boast as an apostle, since they are the means by which God is making known his glory in Christ among the Corinthians (cf. 1:3-11; 2:14-16a; 3:7-4:6; 4:13-18). For this reason, Paul boasts in the very things that cause others to slander him. Paul’s “strength” in 12:10b is not his personal

strength, but the strength that derives from his divinely granted ability to endure adversity for the sake of the gospel (cf. 4:7-18). To boast in his weakness (11:30; 12:5; 12:9-10), therefore, is, at the same time, to boast in what the Lord is doing by his grace and power (Jer 9:22-23; cf. 2 Cor 10:12-18). This then is Paul's strongest argument for the legitimacy of his apostleship: His weaknesses are the very ground of Christ's power.

The Character of the Pastor

What recommended Paul as a true representative of Jesus Christ was his life of suffering as the means for mediating the transforming work of the Spirit, not his personality or his "success" in growing larger churches. Paul's understanding of the nature of Christian ministry thus strikes a piercing blow against all attempts, whether in Paul's day or our own, to fashion ministries and messages around techniques and technology.

Second, as the corollary to Paul's argument from his own suffering *and* the Spirit (not suffering *versus* the Spirit), Paul's portrayal of his ministry also calls into question our image of the "Spirit-filled" Christian. Like Paul's opponents, we too find it hard to shake the "health-and-wealth gospel," with its promise of God's physical and financial blessing for the faithful. In our age of materialism, we find it almost impossible to accept that God would not only use suffering as the vehicle for manifesting the presence and power of his Spirit, but that he would also "lead someone to death" for the sake of revealing his glory and spreading the gospel (2:14). In its place, we strive hard to give the impression that Christians are a people who overcome suffering and want, rather than those who find Christ

strong in their very evident weakness.

Though we do not often overtly express it, deep down we are still convinced that, if we just had enough faith, we should be able to beat or avoid the adversity around us. We believe, somehow, that true followers of Christ should not have to endure the kind of health problems and heartache known to our neighbors. At least our marriages should work and all our children should be Christians! This "health and wealth" assumption is even more evident in regard to pastors, both in terms of our expectations for them and in regard to their own self-understandings. We "naturally" assume that the handsome and healthy are "strong" in the Lord, especially if they are skilled rhetorically. Yet, from Paul's perspective, the dominant characteristic of those in whom God is mightily at work is their confident endurance *in the midst of* adversity. Our pastors are to model perseverance, not personality; morality, not miracles.

Hence, with Paul as their example, pastors should not be surprised when God's leading takes them into deeper waters of suffering than those experienced by their people. This is especially true of the suffering caused by the anxiety they will experience over the spiritual health of their churches (cf. 2:12-13; cf. 6:3-10; 11:28). A "pastor's heart" is a broken heart. And although the Church in the West is not presently suffering the persecution so common elsewhere in the world, many pastors today, like Paul in Corinth, will have to endure the "low-grade," but very discouraging suffering that comes from financial uncertainty, underpayment, and cultural disdain.

Sheep go where their shepherds lead. Congregations take on the vision and values of their pastors. Paul's argument in 2

Corinthians is that his own suffering as an apostle therefore provides the antidote to the Church's "this-worldly" shortsightedness. In the same way today, rather than portraying the persona of the "successful leader," pastors are to take the lead in suffering for the sake of the gospel because of their confidence in the surpassing worth of the glory that "outweighs our light and momentary troubles" (4:18).

At the same time, it must be emphasized that suffering in and of itself is not the revelation of God's power. Paul never glorifies in affliction *per se*. Suffering and oppression in themselves do not mark one out as a representative of Christ in the world. Paul has no romantic notion of suffering. He suffered too much for that. Indeed, by itself, suffering is the consequence of sin. To experience suffering is to be impacted by the evil of our fallen world. Left to itself, suffering is not a noble and purifying virtue. There is no evidence that Paul sought suffering or encouraged others to do so as if it were a sign of special spirituality. He suffered because of God's leading and because of his own seeking of the kingdom, not because he tried to suffer. Hence, the emphasis among some of the early Fathers on actively seeking martyrdom as the highest form of Christian witness is a dangerous *misapplication* of Paul's view of suffering.¹⁹

Believers are, therefore, to avoid circumstantial suffering and persecution, whenever such avoidance does not hinder or compromise their calling, and to pray for healing and deliverance when sick (cf. Rom 12:17-18; 1 Cor 7:15; Phil 4:4-7; 1 Tim 5:23). But the righteous do suffer (Ps 116:10 in 2 Cor 4:13). And some, like Paul and those called to minister the gospel as representatives of Christ, are even *called* to do

so for the sake of the gospel. God makes known his sovereignty and love by handing Paul over "to death" (4:11-12; cf. 1 Cor 4:9; 2 Cor 2:14) and then sustaining him through it so that he may be able to endure in faith (4:8-10; cf. 1 Cor 10:13; Phil 2:15-28).

Finally, Paul's experience as an apostle leads to the conclusion that those called to proclaim and embody the kingdom of God are called to a unique role within the church. Through their lives of trust (1:9), integrity (see 1:12-2:4), and mercy (2:5-11), *in the midst of adversity*, the "saints" entrusted to their care will see displayed before them the reality of Christ's death and resurrection. This implies that the life of the pastor will normally be characterized by a quality (and quantity?) of suffering not usually expected in the lives of those gifted for other equally important roles within the church (see esp. 11:28).

If the goal of Paul's ministry was to bring about the endurance of faith in the lives of God's people, the means to that end was for Paul to live his own life of faith as a servant of the new covenant (3:4-6) publicly before them (4:7-15; 6:3-10). By watching their apostle, the Corinthians see the comfort of God fleshed out in Paul's experience. Hence, the movement in 1:3-11 *from God to Paul to the Corinthians* illustrates that God calls those in ministry to be an example to the church in a way that cannot be said of the church as a whole. The suffering of the pastor or missionary functions as a primary vehicle through which the truth of the gospel is mediated to God's people (cf. 2:14-3:3; 4:7-12; 6:3-10; 12:9-10). To quote Barnett,

Paul's experience of suffering and comfort in the course of his ministry is replicated in every generation in the lives of godly missionaries

and pastors in their interrelationships with their congregations. While both minister and people suffer as they bear witness to Christ in an alien culture, there remains a distinctive role and therefore a distinctive suffering to the Christian leader.

As the comfort of God is experienced in the life of the leader, so it will be passed on through ministry to the people.²⁰

In the midst of a contemporary Church that is often caught up in techniques and technology as the way to “grow a church,” Paul’s message in 2 Corinthians reminds us that just as redemption took place through the coming of Christ, so too God’s plan for strengthening the faith of his people is not ultimately a program, but a person. The life and proclamation of the pastor, replicated in the faith of his people in the midst of their own sufferings, is the primary way God grows his church. One of the central messages of 2 Corinthians is the centrality and significance of the pastoral office. And at the heart of the pastoral office is the suffering of the pastor, even as Christ came as the suffering servant who was obedient to the point of death.

In an age when pastors are being increasingly reconfigured as professional therapists, business managers, and “coaches in the game of life,” such an understanding seems as strange as it is needed. A helpful counter-offensive to this cultural Blitzkrieg is, therefore, David Hansen’s work, *The Art of Pastoring, Ministry without All the Answers*.²¹ Hansen provides a moving, first person portrayal of Paul’s vision of the ministry as it applies to the pastorate today, and by extension to all Christians who are used by God in pastoral ways. Not surprisingly, Hansen frames his observations by pointing to Paul’s words in 2 Corinthians 4:10-11:

... Jesus specifically directed us to follow him in his life’s general direction, the Way of the Cross. Let us object to bearing the cross as pietistic nonsense in a world of “scientific” management principles and psychological method, simply observe that virtually all the trouble that the best, and most talented pastors get into comes from not following the Way of the Cross. The best and most talented in the pastoral ministry and in denominational hierarchies harm themselves and harm the church most through their unrestrained ego and unwillingness to step off the high places. Sexual sin gets the press, but ego sin kills the church. Jesus told us exactly what direction our lives are to take: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34). The power to do pastoral ministry and its central focus . . . lies specifically in the everyday, concrete following of Jesus, led by him on the Way of the Cross. . . . Paul recognized this when he told the Corinthians: “We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body” (2 Cor 4:10-11).²²

ENDNOTES

¹This essay is adapted from my work on 2 Corinthians as presented in my *2 Corinthians*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000). For a more detailed substantiation and development of these points and their application, see this work. For a development of this thesis in regard to Galatians 4:13 and Col. 1:24, see my article, “The Role of Suffering in the Mission of Paul,” in Jöstein Ådna and Hans Kvalbein, *The Mission of the Early Church to Jews and Gentiles*, WUNT (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 2000) 113-

132. If not otherwise indicated, Scripture references are to 2 Corinthians.

²David Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Eerdmans, 1994) 30.

³Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989) 120-121.

⁴See his *Power through Weakness: Paul's Understanding of the Christian Ministry in 2 Corinthians*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 86 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 19-53.

⁵*Ibid.*, 34. The point of the cults was not the doctrine of the religion. As Savage puts it, "It mattered little who the gods were or what the cults taught. What was important was . . . whether everyday desires for health, wealth and safety and, more importantly, power and esteem, were being fulfilled" (52).

⁶*Ibid.*, 34.

⁷The words Paul chose to refer to his troubles (*thlipsis* and *pathēma*) in 2 Corinthians 1:3-11 are general terms that could be used to signify both physical and emotional distress, as well as the suffering caused by persecution. Hence, Paul's full-orbed definition of "suffering" speaks against those who, whether in Paul's day or our own, have attempted to limit the kinds of suffering that can legitimately be experienced by those who are filled with the Spirit. Moreover, Paul's own experiences of physical suffering, persecution, natural deprivations, economic hardships, and the emotional distress of anxiety makes

such a limitation impossible (see 1 Cor 4:11-13; 2 Cor 2:12-13, 17; 4:8-9; 6:4-10; 11:23-28; 12:7; Gal 4:12-16).

⁸I owe this insight to Savage, 169.

⁹*Ibid.*, 183.

¹⁰Alfred Plummer, *Second Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1978 [1915]) 328, points to the prologue to Sirach and to 2 Maccabees 2:26, where the word for "sleeplessness" in 11:27, *agrupnia*, is used of sitting up at night writing, while Sirach 38:26-30 uses it to refer to laborers working at night. In Sirach 36(31):1, 2, 20; 42:9 it is used of sleeplessness caused by anxiety or discomfort.

¹¹Pointed out by Ralph P. Martin, 2 *Corinthians*, Word Biblical Commentary 40 (Waco: Word, 1986) 380.

¹²I owe this observation to James Scott, 2 *Corinthians*, New International Biblical Commentary 8 (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1998) 218. Scott points out that stoning was used for apostasy (Lev 20:2; Deut 13:10-11; 17:2-7), blasphemy (Lev 24:14, 16, 23; 1 Kgs 21:10), sorcery (Lev 20:27), Sabbath violations (Num 15:35-36), misuse of the devoted things (Josh 7:25), a disobedient son (Deut 21:21), and adultery (Deut 22:21-24). Cf. Acts 5:26; 7:58; John 8:5; 10:31-33; 11:8; and Heb 11:37.

¹³Of the three most probable crimes worthy of such a lashing, doctrinal heresy, blasphemy, and serious offenses against Jewish customs, Harvey argues that most likely Paul was whipped for either profaning the Sabbath, working on the Day of Atonement, or committing offenses

against food and ritual purity regulations (cf. *m. Makk.* 3.2; 3.15; *m. Ker.* 1.1). These are the kind of Jewish crimes that would have come about because of his ministry among the Gentiles; see A. E. Harvey, "Forty Strokes Save One: Social Aspects of Judaizing and Apostasy," *Alternative Approaches to New Testament Study*, ed. A. E. Harvey (London: SPCK, 1985) 79-96, 84.

¹⁴So already A. Schlatter, *Paulus, der Bote Jesu: Eine Deutung seiner Briefe an die Korinther* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1969 [1934]) 657: Paul gave this memory from the first period of his ministry in more detail than all the others "because it was an especially clear illustration of the way in which weakness and strength, danger and deliverance were bound together in his work from the very beginning."

¹⁵I.e., 12:6b-7 should read as follows: "I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say, and (= that is to say) because of these surpassingly great revelations. Therefore (*dio*), in order to keep me from becoming conceited, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me, to keep me from becoming conceited." This reading follows the punctuation represented in the Nestle Aland Greek text (27th ed.), which rightly takes the beginning of verse 7 ("and because of these surpassingly great revelations") with verse six and begins a new sentence with the "therefore" of 7b. Keeping Paul from being conceited is derived directly from the granting of the thorn and the tormenting of Satan, which in turn

are derived from the magnitude of Paul's revelations.

¹⁶Martin, 416.

¹⁷So Scott, 229.

¹⁸Ulrich Heckel, *Kraft in Schwachheit: Untersuchungen zu 2.Kor 10-13*, WUNT 2.Reihe 56 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1993) 84.

¹⁹Cf. e.g., the desire of Ignatius (d. ca. A.D. 115) to be devoured by the wild beasts in Rome so that he might "truly be a disciple of Jesus Christ," quoting 1 Cor 15:32 in his *Letter to the Romans*, iv-v.

²⁰Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 80.

²¹Published by InterVarsity Press (1994).

²²Ibid., 27-28.