

## Article of the Month – June 2011

### Theology of Suffering (5) – Paul's Apostolic Sufferings

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Before we look into the promised 'missionary observations' of the second letter to the Corinthians – which we will do next month – we need to go back to a topic we looked at earlier, namely 'Theology of Suffering'. At the time I made a distinction between discipleship suffering and apostolic suffering.<sup>1</sup> We consider the latter, based on how Paul worded it in his second letter to the Corinthians.

After the many controversies which Paul addressed in 1 Corinthians, his references to an earlier letter 'with many tears' and a 'painful visit',<sup>2</sup> we can appreciate the many heart-aches the apostle suffered *over that church*. There were also false apostles that opposed him and his ministry.<sup>3</sup> The theme of *apostolic suffering* has therefore an important place in 2 Corinthians: he gives a blueprint of his theology of suffering.<sup>4</sup> We see a number of elements:

He emphasizes God's compassion and comfort, *not* the harshness of suffering.<sup>5</sup> Paul leaves no room for complaints about his suffering anywhere in his letters. He does not fight, withdraw from, seek to escape, or rebuke the devil for it. The only thing he did was pray, and encourage others to do the same.<sup>6</sup> This is the mature way of dealing with suffering: to accept it so that it can form and shape you.

Receiving comfort from God served for Paul the higher purpose of being able to better comfort *others* in *their* suffering.<sup>7</sup>

The apostolic suffering<sup>8</sup> in Asia<sup>9</sup> was beyond human ability to endure, to the point of near-death; only God's miracles of grace could still save them.<sup>10</sup>

Paul equates apostolic suffering with Christ's suffering, as he says elsewhere.<sup>11</sup>

The Corinthians themselves faced suffering, which Paul saw as a normal part of the Christian life. He had no affinity whatsoever with a trouble-free health-and-wealth gospel.

In his suffering he maintained an eternity-perspective.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See my articles 2008-08 & 2008-09; the term 'apostolic suffering' may well be read as 'missionary suffering'

<sup>2</sup> 2 Cor. 2:3,4,1

<sup>3</sup> 5:12b; 10:1,2,10-12; 11:4,5,13-15,20

<sup>4</sup> 1:3-11

<sup>5</sup> 1:3,4

<sup>6</sup> 1:11

<sup>7</sup> 1:4-7

<sup>8</sup> 1:8 Apostolic suffering (sometimes beyond human ability to endure) should not be confused with normal temptation, which is never heavier than one can deal with (1 Cor. 10:13)

<sup>9</sup> Compare e.g. with Acts 13:50–14:22 and 19:23-31

<sup>10</sup> 1:8-10

<sup>11</sup> Compare 1:5 e.g. with 4:1 and Col. 1:24

<sup>12</sup> 2 Cor. 4:16-18

Later in this letter he elaborates on the contents of his suffering<sup>13</sup> and also speaks about them in other letters.<sup>14</sup>

Part of Paul's suffering consisted of the necessity to defend himself, his ministry, his apostolic authority and his doctrine. 2 Corinthians gives strong examples of this.<sup>15</sup> His opponents were Jews who tried to force gentile Christians into Jewish legalism and circumcision.<sup>16</sup> They were the 'certain men who came from James',<sup>17</sup> although they were neither sent by him nor were they working with his permission. James agreed to the ministry of Paul and Barnabas among the gentiles<sup>18</sup> and felt these should not be required to keep the law of Moses, conform the decree of the Jerusalem Council.<sup>19</sup> This Council even stated that 'some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds with what they said'.<sup>20</sup> Such Pharisees, opposed Paul and had gone on their own initiative.<sup>21</sup> Paul combated these, whom he ironically called 'super-apostles'<sup>22</sup> for what they were: 'false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ and servants of Satan, who also masquerades as an angel of light'.<sup>23</sup>

The zeal with which Paul opposed them can be compared with how, earlier in the letter, he defended the new covenant at the expense of the old.<sup>24</sup> With that principle the whole Christian faith stands or falls. In fact the line of defense in the final four chapters develops along these arguments, including the boasting and the divine revelation.<sup>25</sup>

Paul's suffering is the mark of his apostolic calling,<sup>26</sup> although it was the very thing that, in the eyes of his opponents, disqualified him as an apostle.<sup>27</sup> He was mainly criticized for three reasons: preaching free of charge, his sufferings and his refusal to boast about his spiritual experiences.

The consequence was that his selfless *lifestyle* called the legitimacy of the 'ministry' of the false apostles into question, whose behavior was geared towards material gain. For Paul, weakness – not strength – was the sure sign of true apostolic ministry.<sup>28</sup> An important difference between the problems in both letters is that those of 1 Corinthians were in the church and those in 2 Corinthians had to do with the authority and legitimacy of Paul as an apostle.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> 4:8,9; 6:4-10; 11:23-29; 12:10

<sup>14</sup> Rom. 8:35; 1 Cor. 4:9-13.

<sup>15</sup> 2 Cor. 4:12; 6:8; 10:1,10-12,18a; 11:4,5,12-15,19,20,22,23a,26b; 12:11b

<sup>16</sup> Gal. 2; Acts 15

<sup>17</sup> Gal. 2:12

<sup>18</sup> 2:9

<sup>19</sup> Acts 15:13-19

<sup>20</sup> 15:24

<sup>21</sup> 15:5,1

<sup>22</sup> 2 Cor. 11:5; 12:11

<sup>23</sup> 11:13-15

<sup>24</sup> 3:3-18

<sup>25</sup> 12:2-4

<sup>26</sup> Acts 9:16

<sup>27</sup> Hafemann, in Hawthorne, Martin & Reid, *St. Paul & his Letters*, 1993:168

<sup>28</sup> 2 Cor. 12:9

<sup>29</sup> Hafemann, in Hawthorne, Martin & Reid, *St. Paul & his Letters*, 1993:174

