

**Suffering in Romans:  
An Audience Focussed Reading**

by

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## Chapter Eight: Overall conclusion

### A theology of suffering

We started our inquiry with a socio-historical study and painted a general picture of the types of suffering the audience experienced in first-century Rome. We found that the audience was familiar with many forms of socioeconomic hardship and religio-political injustice. In our exegesis we asked how this audience would have understood Romans 5–8. We studied the pericopes in Romans 5 and 8 in detail, since these two chapters contain the most substantial references to suffering. We paid special attention to the rhetorical strategy of these texts. We also constructed the narratives that are embedded in the texts. We examined the citation of Psalm 44:22 in Romans 8:36 closely, and explored other possible evocations of Israel’s Scripture. We found that the primordial accounts in Genesis would most likely be evoked in Romans 5–8, which, in turn, would be a valuable resource for the audience. We also proposed that the Isaianic Servant Songs would have been evoked, which could be another significant resource for the audience. Throughout our exegesis we attempted to discover how the audience would have construed their theology of suffering — that is, their perspective of life and suffering developed as a result of interacting with the letter — and our findings were summarised at the end of our exegesis of each pericope.<sup>1</sup> Now it is time to put all our findings together and delineate a theology of suffering accordingly. The following is an outline of this theology.

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<sup>1</sup> As mentioned in Chapter One, we do not use the term “theology” to denote a systematic account of faith and belief. Rather, “theology of suffering” refers to the audience’s perspective on suffering in light of what they hear from the letter and their lived experience of pain and affliction.

First, suffering is the vocation of believers and is an integral part of God's purpose for humanity and creation. It does not mean that suffering is pleasant or in itself good. Rather, it means that suffering has a purpose, and that purpose is to share in Christ's glory. Suffering is part and parcel of God's predetermined plan to restore humanity and renew creation. As believers suffer, they are being transformed so that they may bear Christ's image and display God's glory.

Second, since suffering is the vocation of God's children, it defies the principle of retributive justice. Their suffering is not the result of God's punishment. Rather, suffering has educative value — and far more! The suffering of Christ-followers is like that of the suffering righteous, and is a visible sign of their faithfulness to God. They suffer with the assured hope that they will one day be vindicated, and that they will receive the cosmos as their inheritance. The ultimate purpose of their suffering is that they will be God's vice-regents, reigning over the cosmos as members of his royal family.

Third, the theology of suffering in Romans 5–8 is thoroughly Christological and eschatological. Believers suffer *with* Christ, and they will be glorified *with* him. Just as Christ identified with humanity, and just as he suffered and died so as to break the powers of sin and death, so do believers identify with Christ and share in his suffering. Also, believers are God's children because they are led by the eschatological Spirit. As God's children, they are partakers of his eschatological blessings, and because of that they are heirs of God. Indeed, they are co-heirs with Christ, and precisely because of that, they are to suffer with him. The audience, then, are members of God's eschatological community, awaiting their resurrection and the consummation of their glorification.

Fourth, suffering is an integral part of participating in God's triumph. The ultimate cause of suffering is the powers of sin and death. These are evil forces

that contend against God's purpose for humanity and creation. But God has triumphed over evil by sending his Son to die for humanity. By identifying with the Son's suffering and glory, the children of God also participate in his triumph. Thus, the purpose of their suffering has the widest scope and the most profound meaning, for their affliction and pain are part and parcel of God's triumph over evil.

Finally, the Scriptures bear witness to this theology. The eschatological character of the theology is affirmed by Jeremiah 30–33 and Ezekiel 34–37, which anticipate God's deliverance and the outpouring of the Spirit. The primordial accounts in Genesis provide the underlying narrative framework for Adamic humanity and the entry of sin and death into the cosmos. Genesis, then, tells the audience why there are evil forces in the world, which cause suffering and pain for human beings. Genesis also provides the narrative framework behind the Christ-story and that of the new humanity in Christ, for the stories of Christ and the new people of God bear a similar pattern to the Adamic story, except that the events take place in reverse order. Both the story of Christ and that of his followers involve a call to faithful suffering to fulfil God's purpose. In addition, by providing an apt depiction of the suffering righteous, the Isaianic Servant Songs assist the audience to see Christ as *the* righteous sufferer, as well as the fact that believers are fellow partakers of innocent suffering.

### **Future research suggestions**

Due to space limitations, our study has concentrated on Romans 5–8. More work is needed to determine the theology of suffering in the whole letter and other Pauline writings. I will suggest four possible areas of future research here.

First, what does communal life look like in the face of suffering? In our study we suggested that the majority of the audience would have experienced poverty and social oppression in some ways, or at least they would know people with such experience. Of course, not every type of hardship is communal. For example, chronic sickness is the experience of an individual. But it seems that the letter takes for granted that members of the Christ-community are to share one another's burdens, whether the affliction is experienced by many or a few. Hence, in the case of a chronically sick person, the community is called upon to care for her/him. This is clearly demonstrated in Romans 12:9–21, where communal life is in view. The terms *θλιψις*, *διώκω*, *κακός* and *πονηρός* appear in these twelve verses, and all of them are (directly or indirectly) related to suffering. Indeed, *ἀγάπη* and *ἐλπίς* also appear in this pericope, which are prominent in 5:1–5 and 8:18–30. This suggests that Romans 12:9–21 is an important passage for further research on the theology of suffering.<sup>2</sup>

The second area for further research is the use of Psalm 68:10 LXX in Romans 15:3, and the fourfold reference to *γραφή/γράψω/προγράφω* in 15:4. Paul cites Psalm 68:10 LXX and applies the insult and suffering of the psalmist to Christ. It seems that Paul is using the suffering of Christ to encourage his audience as they endure insults. There are strong verbal links between Psalm 68 LXX and Romans 15:3–4, with the terms *ὀνειδισμός/ὀνειδίζω* and *παράκλησις* appearing multiple times in the two texts.<sup>3</sup> The psalmist laments over his/her affliction, and petitions God for his deliverance.<sup>4</sup> The terms *θλίβω* and *θλιψις* can be found in 68:18, 20 LXX as well as Romans 5:3; 8:35; 12:12, indicating that

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<sup>2</sup> See Siu Fung Wu, "Practise Love and Follow Christ," *Transformation* 29 (2012): 64–66, for a brief study on Rom 12:9–21.

<sup>3</sup> The *ὀνειδισμός/ὀνειδίζω* is found in Ps 68:8, 10, 11, 20, 21 LXX, and *παράκλησις* in 68:21.

<sup>4</sup> See Ps 68:2, 14, 15 LXX.

the theme of affliction is shared by the Psalm as well as the pericopes in Romans that speak of suffering. Significantly, Paul says in 15:4 that it is through the *παράκλησις* of Scriptures that believers might have hope. Within the immediate context, Psalm 68:10 LXX is the most relevant Scripture for the audience. Given its Christological usage in Romans 15:3, further research on the use of the Psalm in relation to the audience's suffering in Rome is likely to be a fruitful endeavour.<sup>5</sup>

The above two areas of proposed research are, of course, interconnected, since Romans 12:9–21 and 15:3–4 are located near the beginning and end of 12:1–15:13, which, in turn, constitutes a major section in the letter — one that speaks of the communal life of the house churches in Rome. I think a better understanding of suffering in 12:9–21 and 15:3–4 will help us grapple with the message of 12:1–15:13.<sup>6</sup>

The third area of further research is regarding the use of Habakkuk and its relationship with the *δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ* in Romans 1:17. Habakkuk 3 consists of the prophet's extended lament following Yahweh's answers to his questions concerning theodicy. This lament speaks of one's hope in God's eventual deliverance and determination to persevere despite the upcoming intense suffering. I think the relationship between the theodicy question in Habakkuk and the theology of suffering in Romans begs attention. Are there similarities between our findings in Romans 5–8 and Habakkuk's protest and lament? If there are, does the theology of suffering delineated above shed light on the meaning of *δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ*? It may well be that a deeper understanding of

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<sup>5</sup> See Wu, "Practise love," 66–68, for a brief discussion of this.

<sup>6</sup> In a short study in Wu, "Practise love," 68, I argue that Paul's audience is called upon to model after Christ's suffering and sacrificial way of life as they seek to live as a love-centred community.

God's eschatological deliverance of the suffering righteous will help us understand the meaning of δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ better.

Finally, it is worth exploring Paul's understanding of suffering in relation to his view of God's purpose for humanity and the place of Christ's death and resurrection in his theology. In our study we set out to explore the issues concerning suffering from the audience's perspective. This approach means that we do not need to cross-reference what Paul says elsewhere concerning suffering. But this does not mean that Paul's other letters have no place in our quest for a theology of suffering. For example, Philippians 3:10–11 clearly speaks of Paul's desire to participate in Christ's suffering, death and resurrection. It would be interesting to compare and contrast Philippians and Romans in terms of the interrelationships between suffering and participation in Christ. Also, Paul's use of εἰκὼν, μεταμορφώω, δόξα and κτίσις in 2 Corinthians 3:18; 4:4; 5:17 echoes the corresponding key words in Romans 8. Since 2 Corinthians contains numerous references to suffering, it would be worthwhile to explore the relationship between affliction and God's purpose for humanity and creation in this letter. My sense is that participation in Christ is an essential element of — if not central to — Paul's theology, and that sharing in his suffering is an integral part of it.<sup>7</sup> It would be a fruitful exercise to examine the above Pauline discussions of suffering, creation and Christ, and see whether there is an emerging coherent Pauline thought.

Indeed there is much to be explored concerning the theology of suffering in Romans and other Pauline letters. I hope this thesis has served to highlight an

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<sup>7</sup> Kar Yong Lim seems to have made a similar observation in his detailed study on suffering in 2 Corinthians. Lim, *Sufferings*, 198, concludes that Paul invites the Corinthians to participate in the story — and, hence, suffering — of Christ, for this will bring transformation to the life of the community.

important aspect of the letter's argument, and that it will spark interest in further research on the topic.