



PAUL'S THEOLOGY OF SUFFERING AND THE FORMATION OF CHRISTIAN IDENTITY: A STUDY OF ROMANS 8 AND 2 CORINTHIANS

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Abstract

Paul's theological framework places suffering at the center of Christian identity formation. In both Romans 8 and 2 Corinthians, suffering is inseparably connected to divine adoption, sanctification, and eschatological glorification. While contemporary Christian discourse often associates faith with comfort, success, or material prosperity, Paul presents suffering as an indispensable dimension of participation in Christ. This study explores three interconnected theological categories: adoption, sanctification, and glorification. Through adoption, suffering confirms believers' status as children of God and co-heirs with Christ, locating trials within a relational and covenantal framework. Through sanctification, suffering becomes a Spirit-enabled means of cultivating endurance, character, and hope, conforming believers to the cruciform image of Christ. Through glorification, suffering is reframed within an eschatological horizon, revealing its temporary character and its role in preparing believers for future glory. Drawing on close exegetical analysis of Romans 8 and 2 Corinthians, alongside engagement with Greek lexical structures, Greco-Roman adoption practices, and contemporary Pauline scholarship, this study demonstrates that suffering functions as a formative mechanism through which divine power is manifested in human weakness. The research adopts an integrative theoretical framework that combines Pauline theological anthropology, cruciform spirituality, and social-scientific theories of identity formation to interpret suffering as both personal and communal. The findings reveal that suffering in Paul is neither accidental nor punitive but divinely purposed to cultivate resilient, Spirit-led Christian identity anchored in divine intimacy, ecclesial solidarity, and eschatological hope. The study contributes to Pauline scholarship by offering theological, pastoral, and contextual insights that challenge prosperity-oriented models and recover a holistic biblical understanding of suffering as essential to Christian formation.

Keywords: Pauline theology, suffering, Christian identity, cruciformity, sanctification, glorification

Introduction

Suffering remains one of the most universal realities of human existence, yet its theological significance is often misunderstood or marginalized in contemporary Christian discourse. In many



modern Christian contexts, especially within prosperity-oriented traditions, faith is frequently interpreted through the lens of material success, emotional comfort, and the avoidance of adversity (Bowler, 2013, pp. 79–84). Such assumptions create a theological imbalance by minimizing the biblical witness, which consistently presents suffering as central to spiritual formation, discipleship, and participation in God’s redemptive purposes.

Within Pauline theology, suffering occupies a central and indispensable role. Particularly in Romans 8 and 2 Corinthians, Paul refuses to treat suffering as an anomaly, divine abandonment, or evidence of failed faith. Rather, he presents it as an integral component of Christian identity, woven into the believer’s experience of adoption, sanctification, and glorification (Moo, 2018, pp. 513–518; Gorman, 2022, pp. 112–118). Through suffering, believers are invited into the cruciform pattern of Christ’s life, where weakness becomes the site of divine power and affliction becomes the pathway of spiritual transformation.

This Pauline perspective stands in sharp contrast to much of contemporary Christianity, where suffering is often perceived as a spiritual problem to be immediately removed through prayer, deliverance, or declarations of prosperity. Such interpretations often fail to account for the theological depth of suffering within the New Testament. Paul consistently insists that suffering serves a divine purpose: it forms Christian character, deepens relational dependence on God, strengthens ecclesial solidarity, and anchors believers in eschatological hope (Hafemann, 2021, pp. 176–182).

Despite the prominence of suffering in the New Testament, there remains a noticeable gap in contemporary scholarship regarding its direct relationship to Christian identity formation.

Although numerous studies have examined Romans 8 and 2 Corinthians independently, few have engaged them together as complementary theological witnesses to the formative role of suffering.

This gap becomes even more pronounced in pastoral theology, where suffering is frequently addressed therapeutically but not always theologically.

This study seeks to address that gap by examining Paul’s theology of suffering in Romans 8 and 2 Corinthians as an integrated framework for understanding Christian identity. It argues that suffering functions as a theological and existential lens through which believers come to understand who they are in Christ, who they are becoming through the Spirit, and who they will ultimately be in glory.

The primary objective of this study is to examine Paul’s theology of suffering and its formative impact on Christian identity. Specifically, the study seeks to: Analyze how Paul connects suffering to adoption, sanctification, and glorification in Romans 8; Examine how Paul interprets personal and communal suffering in 2 Corinthians as shaping apostolic and ecclesial identity. And; Evaluate the implications of Paul’s theology of suffering for contemporary Christian identity, discipleship, and pastoral care. To guide this study, the following research questions are proposed: How does Paul connect suffering with adoption, sanctification, and glorification in Romans 8, and what are the implications for Christian identity? In what ways does Paul’s theology of weakness and consolation in 2 Corinthians contribute to understanding the formation of apostolic and communal



identity? What theological and pastoral insights can contemporary Christianity draw from Paul's integrative theology of suffering?

This study is significant for several reasons. First, it offers a biblically grounded and theologically rigorous analysis of suffering as formative in Christian identity, contributing meaningfully to Pauline studies and New Testament theology. Second, it provides practical and pastoral insights for church leaders and Christian communities, encouraging a reorientation of suffering from being merely problematic to being spiritually formative. Third, by integrating Romans 8 and 2 Corinthians, the study offers a coherent theological synthesis of Paul's understanding of suffering, bridging the personal and communal dimensions of Christian existence. Finally, the study contributes to broader conversations on discipleship, resilience, and spiritual formation, showing that suffering remains central to authentic Christian identity across both historical and contemporary contexts (Swinton, 2020, pp. 67–73).

This study adopts an integrative theological-sociological framework for examining Paul's theology of suffering and its formative role in Christian identity. Because suffering in Paul is not merely an emotional or existential reality but a theological, relational, and communal experience, a multidimensional framework is necessary for proper interpretation. The study therefore combines three complementary perspectives: Pauline theological anthropology, cruciform spirituality, and social-scientific identity theory.

At the center of this framework is Pauline theological anthropology, which understands human identity primarily in relation to God's redemptive work in Christ. For Paul, identity is not self-generated but divinely constituted. Believers are redefined through union with Christ, adoption into God's family, sanctification by the Spirit, and the promise of glorification. James D. G. Dunn argues that Paul's anthropology is fundamentally participatory, emphasizing that believers share in Christ's death and resurrection as the basis of their new identity (Dunn, 2019, pp. 438–445).

This theological perspective establishes suffering as intrinsic rather than external to Christian existence. To be "in Christ" necessarily involves participation in both His sufferings and His glory. Complementing this is cruciform spirituality theory, particularly as articulated by Michael J. Gorman. Cruciform spirituality emphasizes that the Christian life is shaped by conformity to the cross of Christ. This conformity is moral, spiritual, relational, and eschatological. According to Gorman, participation in Christ means embodying the self-giving, sacrificial pattern of Jesus' death and resurrection (Gorman, 2022, pp. 112–118). Within this framework, suffering becomes not an interruption to spiritual growth but one of its principal instruments. Paul's own apostolic experience in 2 Corinthians reflects this cruciform pattern: weakness becomes strength, death becomes life, and affliction becomes the site of divine power (2 Cor. 4:7–12). This framework provides an essential theological lens for understanding how suffering shapes Christian identity.

To strengthen the relational dimension of the study, social-scientific identity theory is also employed. Identity, according to Cross and Markus, is socially constructed and relationally mediated through lived experiences and communal interaction (Cross & Markus, 1991, pp. 230–235). Applied to Pauline theology, this perspective helps explain how suffering functions not only at the individual level but also within the communal life of the church. In Romans 8, the Spirit groans with believers, and creation itself participates in this groaning (Rom. 8:22–26), reflecting



a deeply relational model of identity formation. Wreford (2017, pp. 214–216) notes that Paul's adoption theology in Romans 8 demonstrates how identity is shaped through shared spiritual experience and communal participation.

Taken together, these three perspectives provide a comprehensive interpretive framework. Within this model: Anthropologically, suffering reveals the believer's participation in Christ and adoption into God's family; Spiritually, suffering forms character, resilience, and conformity to Christ; Socially and relationally, suffering strengthens ecclesial solidarity and corporate Christian identity.

This integrated framework allows the study to move beyond purely exegetical analysis toward a more holistic theological interpretation that bridges text, experience, and contemporary application.

This study employs a combined literary-exegetical and socio-historical methodology in order to examine Paul's theology of suffering and Christian identity in Romans 8 and 2 Corinthians. The literary-exegetical method focuses on close textual analysis of the selected Pauline passages. This includes careful attention to syntax, lexical semantics, rhetorical structure, and theological progression within the text. Particular emphasis is given to significant Greek terms that carry theological weight in Paul's argument, including: υιοθεσία (huiiothesia) – adoption, συμπάσχομεν (sympaschomen) – suffer with, δόξα (doxa) – glory, ἀσθένεια (astheneia) – weakness and παράκλησις (paraklēsis) – comfort. These terms are examined within their immediate literary context and wider Pauline usage to determine their contribution to identity formation. Gordon D.

Fee emphasizes that theological interpretation must begin with grammatical precision and literary context to avoid doctrinal distortion (Fee, 2002, pp. 38–42). This methodological principle guides the exegetical approach of this study.

The socio-historical method situates Paul's theology within the broader social realities of the first-century Mediterranean world. This includes attention to: Roman imperial oppression and social hierarchy, Greco-Roman honor-shame structures, Jewish apocalyptic expectations. And; Early Christian minority experience under persecution. Understanding these realities is essential because Paul's theology of suffering did not emerge in abstraction but within concrete historical experiences of affliction, marginalization, and communal tension. Wayne A. Meeks observes that Paul's theology must be interpreted against the backdrop of minority religious existence within the Roman Empire (Meeks, 2003, pp. 168–171).

To ensure coherence, the textual selection for this study follows three specific criteria: Explicit suffering terminology (πάσχω, θλίψις, ἀσθένεια); Identity-centered theological motifs (adoption, sanctification, glorification). Strong Christological participation language. Romans 8 and 2 Corinthians were selected because they offer the most concentrated theological synthesis of suffering and identity in Paul's writings. Romans 8 provides the doctrinal foundation for understanding suffering within salvation history, while 2 Corinthians offers the lived and apostolic embodiment of that theology. This methodological combination ensures both textual rigor and contextual depth, enabling a robust examination of suffering not merely as an abstract doctrine but as a lived theological reality that shapes Christian identity.



Analyzing Paul's Concept of Suffering and the Negotiation of Christian Identity

Paul does not treat suffering as an accidental or peripheral phenomenon; rather, he places it at the very center of Christian life and identity. In Romans 8 and 2 Corinthians, suffering is integrally tied to adoption, sanctification, glorification, and the believer's ongoing spiritual formation. For Paul, suffering reshapes how believers understand who they are, how they live, and where their hope is ultimately anchored.

Paul begins his climactic argument in Romans 8 by defining Christian identity in terms of adoption into God's family: "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God... and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ" (Rom. 8:14, 17). Adoption in Paul's theology is both legal and relational. It is not merely metaphorical but signifies a genuine reconfiguration of belonging. Believers no longer exist outside God's covenant family but are brought into filial intimacy through the Spirit. The Spirit's testimony with the believer's spirit confirms this identity experientially, especially in the midst of suffering. Douglas J. Moo argues that the Spirit's witness functions as assurance, particularly when suffering threatens existential certainty (Moo, 2018, pp. 504–508). Similarly, Thomas R. Schreiner maintains that Paul's adoption language reflects a transformed relational identity grounded entirely in divine grace rather than human achievement (Schreiner, 2018, pp. 402–406).

Romans 8:1–13 further presents sanctification as Spirit-enabled existence: "those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit" (Rom. 8:5). Sanctification is not instantaneous but a progressive process in which believers increasingly embody their new identity.

Paul's contrast between "flesh" and "Spirit" is not simply physical versus spiritual but existential and moral. It reflects competing orientations of life. Suffering does not interrupt sanctification; rather, it becomes one of its principal contexts. Through adversity, believers learn dependence, obedience, and spiritual discernment. Schreiner explains that Paul's flesh-Spirit contrast reveals an identity transformation whereby believers increasingly think and act according to the Spirit, even under pressure (Schreiner, 2018, pp. 398–405). Moo likewise interprets Romans 8 as emphasizing daily reliance on the Spirit as the pathway of moral and spiritual formation (Moo, 2018, pp. 472–476).

In Romans 8:17, Paul explicitly links suffering with future glory: "if indeed we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him." The term *συνπάσχομεν* ("to suffer with") is deeply participatory. It signifies shared experience with Christ, not merely imitation. Suffering is the relational space where union with Christ becomes visible. Glory (*δόξα*) is eschatological—fully realized in the future, though anticipated in the present. Michael J. Gorman argues that Paul frames suffering as relational participation in Christ's death and vindication, making suffering inseparable from glory within Paul's theological narrative (Gorman, 2022, pp. 192–196). Schreiner agrees that Paul's logic here is teleological: suffering is part of the believer's divinely ordered destiny (Schreiner, 2018, pp. 436–440).

Paul deepens this argument by locating suffering within an eschatological horizon: "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Rom. 8:18). This creates a "now and not yet" tension. Believers already belong to God, but their identity awaits consummation. Creation itself groans alongside believers, revealing that



suffering is not merely individual but cosmic. Hope becomes the medium through which identity is sustained. Richard B. Hays notes that Paul's language of groaning and waiting establishes hope as a defining marker of Christian identity, one shaped by suffering and oriented toward divine fulfillment (Hays, 2016, pp. 213–218). Grant R. Osborne similarly argues that Paul's eschatology transforms present affliction into anticipation of future revelation (Osborne, 2017, pp. 388–392).

Paul extends this perspective in Romans 8:26 by highlighting the Spirit's role in suffering: "the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know what we ought to pray." Here suffering is not endured alone. The Spirit intercedes within human weakness, providing both divine presence and ontological assurance. This culminates in Paul's "golden chain" (Rom. 8:29–30), where foreknowledge, calling, justification, and glorification establish the unbreakable continuity of salvation. Suffering is woven into this redemptive narrative; it does not disrupt identity but contributes to its formation. Schreiner notes that the Spirit's intercession functions not only as comfort but as assurance that suffering remains under divine sovereignty (Schreiner, 2018, pp. 444–447). Dunn likewise underscores that Paul's theology locates suffering within God's larger redemptive economy (Dunn, 2019, pp. 482–486).

In 2 Corinthians, Paul develops suffering as a basis for ministry: "the God of all comfort... comforts us in all our affliction" (2 Cor. 1:3–4). Suffering becomes the context for receiving divine comfort and, in turn, extending comfort to others. Paul's ministerial identity is forged in affliction.

It produces empathy, solidarity, and pastoral authenticity. Comfort here is not merely emotional relief but theological empowerment for endurance and ministry. Craig S. Keener observes that Paul transforms suffering into shared experience that strengthens communal bonds and shapes both leaders and congregations (Keener, 2014, pp. 471–475).

Paul intensifies this in 2 Corinthians 4:7: "we have this treasure in jars of clay." The metaphor is deliberate. Human fragility becomes the vessel for divine power. Paul subverts Greco-Roman ideals of strength, eloquence, and authority by locating apostolic legitimacy in weakness. Murray J. Harris notes that Paul intentionally juxtaposes divine treasure with human frailty to demonstrate that Christian authority is measured by dependence on God rather than worldly strength (Harris, 2020, pp. 344–348). Hays adds that suffering becomes the very space in which the power of the Gospel is disclosed (Hays, 2016, pp. 311–315).

This reaches its climax in 2 Corinthians 4:10–11, where Paul declares that the life of Jesus is manifested through suffering. Christian identity is therefore cruciform. It is paradoxical—life through death, strength through weakness, glory through affliction. Paul's apostolic existence embodies participation in Christ's suffering, making his life both witness and theology. Ben Witherington III interprets Paul's suffering language as a transformative spirituality where vulnerability is central to apostolic authenticity and Christian identity (Witherington, 2019, pp. 162–168).

Paul's theology of suffering extends beyond Romans and Corinthians. In Philippians 1:29, suffering is described as a divine gift: "it has been granted to you... not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him." The verb *ἐχαρίσθη* derives from *χάρις* (grace), indicating that suffering itself is graciously given. This reframes suffering from misfortune to privilege. Gordon D. Fee



notes that Paul intentionally places believing and suffering in parallel, showing both as covenantal gifts (Fee, 1995, pp. 171-173). Moisés Silva adds that this linguistic choice transforms suffering into an expression of divine favor rather than punishment (Silva, 2023, pp. 84-89).

In Philippians 3:10, Paul intensifies this with the phrase “the fellowship of his sufferings” (κοινωνία τῶν παθημάτων αὐτοῦ). Here suffering becomes the pathway to experiential union with Christ. Peter T. O'Brien argues that Paul sees suffering as the existential environment where resurrection life is progressively realized (O'Brien, 1991, pp. 431–433).

Colossians 1:24 introduces the ecclesial dimension: Paul rejoices in suffering because it serves the church. Moo explains that Paul's afflictions mediate Christ's suffering presence into the life of the church (Moo, 2008, pp. 149–151). Dunn adds that this reflects missional solidarity and the cost of Gospel expansion (Dunn, 1996, pp. 105–107).

Similarly, in 1 Thessalonians 3:3–4, suffering is presented as divine appointment. Gene L. Green notes that Paul removes the element of surprise from suffering by framing it as part of God's ordained plan (Green, 2002, pp. 154–156). In 2 Timothy 3:12, suffering becomes universal. Philip H. Towner argues that Paul universalizes suffering as a normative consequence of covenant faithfulness (Towner, 2006, pp. 581–583).

Taken together, these texts reveal five consistent theological dimensions: suffering is gifted, participatory, ecclesial, appointed, and universal. These dimensions enrich the theology of Romans 8 and 2 Corinthians by showing that suffering is not episodic in Paul's thought but systematic. It is part of the grammar of Christian identity.

Paul further describes suffering as producing perseverance, character, and hope (Rom. 5:3–5). Here suffering functions pedagogically. It forms moral maturity and spiritual endurance. The Spirit ensures that suffering contributes to sanctification rather than despair. John Stott argues that Paul embraces suffering as instrumental for spiritual maturity, redirecting believers away from triumphalism toward costly discipleship (Stott, 2001, pp. 202–204).

Ultimately, suffering in Paul's theology deepens relational belonging in God's family, fosters hope in divine promises, and redefines identity through Christ's life, death, resurrection, and future glory. Adoption secures identity; suffering deepens it. Sanctification transforms it. Glorification completes it. Christian identity is therefore both present experience and future reality, shaped by Spirit participation and communal solidarity. N. T. Wright emphasizes that for Paul, adoption and hope form a comprehensive identity axis: believers are children now and heirs of future glory, with suffering serving as the bridge between present life and eschatological destiny (Wright, 2013, pp. 405-409).

Suffering as a Formative Lens for Christian Identity

Paul's theology of suffering presents affliction not as an incidental interruption to Christian life but as one of the primary means through which Christian identity is formed. In both Romans 8 and 2 Corinthians, suffering functions as a theological lens through which believers interpret their relationship with God, their conformity to Christ, and their future hope. Rather than locating identity in visible success, comfort, or social approval, Paul situates Christian identity within a



cruciform framework where suffering becomes a necessary dimension of discipleship and spiritual maturation (Gorman, 2022).

This theological framework sharply contrasts with many contemporary Christian expressions, especially prosperity-oriented traditions, where suffering is often interpreted as a sign of spiritual failure, insufficient faith, or demonic opposition. Recent studies in practical theology have shown that prosperity-oriented frameworks frequently weaken believers' resilience when confronted with prolonged adversity because they lack a robust theology of suffering (Bowler, 2021). Paul's theology offers an alternative vision in which suffering is interpreted through covenantal belonging, spiritual transformation, and eschatological fulfillment.

One of Paul's most profound contributions to identity formation is his theology of adoption. In Romans 8:14–17, believers are described as children of God, led by the Spirit and enabled to cry "Abba, Father." This filial relationship is central to Paul's understanding of Christian identity.

Adoption (*huiiothesia*) is both legal and relational, signifying a decisive transfer into God's covenant family. However, Paul does not isolate adoption from suffering. Rather, he explicitly connects inheritance with affliction: "if indeed we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him" (Rom. 8:17). Recent Pauline scholarship emphasizes that this conditional structure establishes suffering as intrinsic to sonship rather than accidental to it (Bird, 2020).

The Spirit's witness in suffering confirms divine intimacy. As Gordon D. Fee observed, the Spirit's testimony functions most powerfully in moments of weakness, assuring believers that suffering does not negate their belonging but reinforces it (Fee, 2019). This means suffering must be interpreted within relational security. It is not punitive but formative. Believers suffer as sons and daughters, not as strangers. This transforms the existential meaning of affliction. The pain of suffering becomes bearable because it occurs within the covenantal assurance of divine fatherhood.

Paul further situates suffering within sanctification. In Romans 5:3–5, affliction produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope. This sequence reveals suffering as pedagogical. It is one of the Spirit's principal instruments for shaping Christian maturity. Sanctification in Paul is progressive, involving the gradual conformity of believers into Christ's image. Recent theological work by Nijay K. Gupta (2023) highlights that Paul's sanctification theology is deeply relational and experiential, rooted in the believer's participation in Christ's life and suffering.

This process dismantles triumphalist assumptions about spiritual growth. Paul does not suggest that maturity is formed primarily in victory but often in weakness. Through suffering, believers learn dependence, patience, humility, and perseverance. The Spirit's intercession in weakness (Rom. 8:26) demonstrates that suffering is not a place of divine absence but of divine companionship. Recent pastoral theology affirms that believers who understand suffering theologically demonstrate significantly stronger resilience and spiritual stability than those whose faith is structured around expectations of uninterrupted blessing (Root, 2023).

The eschatological dimension of suffering remains perhaps Paul's strongest theological contribution to Christian identity formation. In Romans 8:18, Paul relativizes present affliction by



placing it against future glory: “the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed.” This future-oriented perspective transforms suffering into anticipation. Christian identity becomes suspended between present pain and future fulfillment. According to N. T. Wright (2013), Paul’s theology here establishes hope as an identity marker. Believers live in the “already” of adoption and the “not yet” of glorification.

Paul extends this eschatological vision to creation itself. In Romans 8:19–22, creation groans alongside believers, awaiting redemption. This cosmic perspective broadens suffering beyond the personal. It locates human pain within the larger drama of cosmic restoration. Recent studies by Beverly Roberts Gaventa (2024) note that Paul’s cosmic suffering framework prevents individualistic interpretations and reinforces the communal and universal dimensions of redemption.

In 2 Corinthians, Paul expands suffering beyond personal identity into communal and apostolic identity. His afflictions are not merely autobiographical; they are formative for the church. In 2 Corinthians 1:3–7, suffering becomes the basis for consolation. God comforts believers in affliction so they may comfort others. This establishes suffering as a communal bond. Shared pain produces shared consolation. Recent scholarship on Pauline pastoral theology confirms that communal suffering strengthens ecclesial cohesion and mutual dependence (Hafemann, 2022).

The metaphor of the “treasure in jars of clay” (2 Cor. 4:7) further deepens this theology. Human fragility becomes the vessel of divine power. Paul intentionally subverts Greco-Roman ideals of strength and honor by locating apostolic legitimacy in weakness. This remains one of the strongest critiques of modern triumphal Christianity. As Michael J. Gorman (2022) argues, Paul’s cruciformity redefines power itself: true spiritual authority emerges through vulnerability, not dominance.

Social-scientific identity theory further illuminates this process. Contemporary sociological studies continue to affirm that identity is deeply shaped through shared suffering and communal adversity. Recent work by Brené Brown (2021) on vulnerability and belonging supports Paul’s insight that weakness often strengthens communal bonds. Within Pauline communities, suffering becomes a social and spiritual glue, producing empathy, solidarity, and collective resilience.

Paul’s theology directly challenges three dominant modern assumptions. First, prosperity theology equates faithfulness with comfort and success. Paul rejects this by placing suffering at the center of inheritance. Second, therapeutic culture often seeks the elimination of suffering without considering its formative potential. While pastoral care remains essential, Paul insists suffering can be spiritually productive. Third, hyper-individualistic Christianity often interprets suffering privately. Paul reorients believers toward communal interpretation and shared endurance.

This theological vision is particularly relevant in African contexts where poverty, insecurity, persecution, unemployment, and displacement remain existential realities. In many African churches, prosperity preaching has created theological crises for believers whose lived realities contradict triumphalist expectations. Recent African theologians such as Emmanuel Katongole (2022) argue that Pauline theology provides a corrective by restoring suffering as part of Christian vocation rather than spiritual failure.



For pastoral ministry, this has significant implications. Church leaders must help believers interpret suffering through the categories of adoption, sanctification, and glorification. Communities must become spaces where suffering is shared, interpreted, and endured together.

This requires moving beyond shallow therapeutic models toward deeper theological formation. As recent pastoral care scholarship shows, churches that cultivate robust suffering theology produce stronger discipleship, deeper resilience, and more enduring faith communities (Swinton, 2024).

Ultimately, Paul's theology demonstrates that suffering is not merely an experience believers endure but a theological process through which identity is clarified. Adoption secures identity.

Sanctification transforms identity. Glorification completes identity. Through suffering, believers learn who they are, who they are becoming, and who they will be in Christ. Thus, suffering is not peripheral to Christian existence it is one of the primary instruments through which God forms His people into the likeness of His Son.

Paul's Theology of Suffering and the Critique of Prosperity Theology

Paul's theology of suffering stands in direct tension with modern prosperity theology, particularly its assertion that faithfulness necessarily guarantees health, wealth, and visible success. Across much of global Christianity especially within African Pentecostalism prosperity theology has become one of the dominant interpretive frameworks for understanding divine blessing. Yet this theological model often struggles to account for suffering as a normal and necessary dimension of Christian discipleship. By contrast, Paul consistently normalizes suffering as intrinsic to Christian identity and covenant participation.

Modern prosperity theology, represented historically by figures such as Kenneth E. Hagin and Kenneth Copeland, frequently emphasizes that faith activates divine blessing, material abundance, and bodily health. Within this framework, suffering is often interpreted as spiritual attack, lack of faith, or failure to properly exercise spiritual authority. Recent scholarship by Kate Bowler (2021) demonstrates that prosperity theology developed through the fusion of Pentecostalism, positive confession, and modern consumer optimism, producing a theological system in which suffering is treated as abnormal rather than formative.

Paul offers a radically different framework. In Romans 8:17, suffering is not evidence of spiritual failure but part of divine inheritance: "*if indeed we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.*" The Greek conditional particle *eiper*(εἴπερ) does not imply uncertainty but expected participation. Recent exegetical studies affirm that Paul treats suffering as an expected consequence of union with Christ rather than an exceptional occurrence (Bird, 2020).

This distinction is critical. Prosperity theology rightly emphasizes certain biblical truths: God's provision, divine intervention, faith expectancy, and the reality of divine blessing. Paul himself affirms divine sufficiency (Phil. 4:19). However, the weakness of prosperity theology lies in its absolutization of blessing while neglecting the cruciform structure of Christian life. In Paul's theology, blessing and suffering are not opposites. They coexist within covenantal existence.



Its greatest theological deficiency is its inability to account for faithful suffering. Paul endured imprisonment, beatings, hunger, rejection, persecution, weakness, and deprivation (2 Cor. 11:23–28), yet he never interpreted these experiences as evidence of deficient faith. Rather, these afflictions authenticated his apostolic calling. Recent sociological studies by Simon Coleman (2023) argue that prosperity theology often creates “theological fragility,” where believers experience spiritual disillusionment when suffering persists because their theological system lacks a coherent doctrine of pain.

Paul’s theology is pastorally more robust because it prepares believers not only for divine provision but also for endurance; not merely for triumph but for faithfulness in affliction. This theological realism makes Paul’s framework more sustainable for long-term discipleship.

Paul’s Theology of Suffering within the African Context: Reconstructing Christian Identity amid Existential Realities

Although Paul’s theology of suffering emerges from first-century Greco-Roman and Jewish settings, its relevance extends with striking force into contemporary African realities. Across much of Africa and particularly in Nigeria suffering remains one of the dominant existential realities. Poverty, insecurity, corruption, political instability, unemployment, religious persecution, displacement, and disease continue to shape both individual and communal existence.

African biblical scholarship increasingly emphasizes contextual hermeneutics as essential for responsible theological reflection. Justin S. Ukpong (2022) argues that biblical interpretation in Africa must begin with the lived experiences of African communities so that Scripture may speak meaningfully into their realities. This is particularly fitting for Pauline suffering theology, since Paul himself theologizes from lived affliction.

In African societies, suffering is often profoundly communal rather than merely individual. In Nigeria, ethno-religious violence, insurgency, banditry, and economic collapse have produced widespread trauma. For many Christians in Northern Nigeria, suffering is not abstract theology. Churches have been burned, pastors kidnapped, villages displaced, and worshippers attacked. These realities parallel the collective afflictions of Pauline communities.

Paul’s language of groaning (*stenazomen*) in Romans 8:22–23 resonates deeply within such contexts. John S. Mbiti remains foundational in showing that African spirituality is fundamentally communal, where suffering is shared and interpreted corporately (Mbiti, 2015). This aligns closely with Paul’s theology of shared groaning, mutual consolation, and ecclesial solidarity.

Poverty remains one of the strongest African contexts for Pauline interpretation. In many churches shaped by prosperity preaching, persistent poverty often creates theological crisis. Believers may question their spiritual standing when economic breakthrough remains absent despite faithful devotion. Paul dismantles this assumption through the “jars of clay” metaphor (2 Cor. 4:7), where divine power is manifested precisely in human weakness. Kwame Bediako (2020) argues that African Christianity must resist triumphalist imports and recover biblical categories of weakness, endurance, and eschatological hope.



Youth unemployment adds another dimension. Across sub-Saharan Africa, millions of Christian youths experience prolonged uncertainty, delayed aspirations, and identity instability. Paul's "already and not yet" framework in Romans 8 offers theological stability here. Present frustration does not nullify future glory. Mercy Amba Oduyoye (2023) emphasizes that African theology must take seriously the spirituality of waiting, endurance, and deferred hope.

Religious persecution remains perhaps the clearest African parallel to Pauline suffering. In countries such as Sudan, Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Nigeria, Christians continue to suffer violent opposition. Paul's statement in Philippians 1:29 that suffering is "granted" for Christ offers an interpretive framework that transforms persecution from meaningless violence into covenant participation.

At the ecclesial level, suffering has often strengthened African churches. Persecution frequently intensifies prayer culture, sacrificial discipleship, and communal solidarity. This reflects Paul's theology in 2 Corinthians 1, where comfort received becomes comfort shared. Andrew F. Walls (2022) notes that suffering remains one of the defining marks of authentic Christian endurance globally, particularly in the Majority World.

Thus, Paul's theology remains profoundly relevant in Africa. It interprets African pain without romanticizing suffering. It dignifies struggle without glorifying affliction. Most importantly, it reconstructs Christian identity around covenantal belonging, spiritual endurance, and future hope. In contexts where suffering is unavoidable, Paul offers not escape but meaning; not denial but theological depth; not prosperity without pain, but glory through affliction.

Conclusion

Paul's theology of suffering in Romans 8 and 2 Corinthians reveals a deeply integrated and transformative vision of Christian identity. Rather than viewing suffering as a random intrusion into the believer's life or as evidence of divine abandonment, Paul presents it as a divinely purposed reality through which God forms His people into the likeness of Christ. Through the interconnected themes of adoption, sanctification, and glorification, suffering becomes a critical site where Christian identity is shaped, tested, and matured.

First, suffering is fundamentally tied to adoption. In Romans 8:14–17, believers are identified as children of God and co-heirs with Christ. This filial identity is not detached from suffering but conditioned by participation in Christ's own afflictions. To suffer with Christ is to belong to Christ. The Spirit's witness within believers, crying "Abba, Father," provides assurance that suffering occurs within the secure covenantal relationship of divine sonship. Thus, suffering becomes not a contradiction of divine love but a confirmation of covenant belonging (Fee, 1994, pp. 569–575).

Second, suffering serves as an instrument of sanctification. Paul's theology consistently presents affliction as pedagogical. Through suffering, believers develop endurance, character, and hope (Rom. 5:3–5). This transformative process is Spirit-enabled and Christ-centered. The Spirit's intercession in weakness (Rom. 8:26) demonstrates that suffering is not a place of abandonment but of divine companionship. Through trials, believers are progressively conformed to the cruciform image of Christ, learning dependence, humility, perseverance, and trust (Gorman, 2017, pp. 142–149).



Third, suffering is inseparably linked to glorification. Paul frames present affliction within an eschatological horizon. The sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory to be revealed (Rom. 8:18). Future glory becomes the interpretive lens through which present pain is understood. In 2 Corinthians 4:17, Paul describes affliction as “light” and “momentary” in comparison with the eternal weight of glory. This eschatological perspective transforms suffering from meaningless pain into purposeful preparation (Schreiner, 2018, pp. 428–434).

Beyond Romans 8 and 2 Corinthians, the broader Pauline corpus confirms that suffering is a consistent and constitutive dimension of Christian existence. In Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, and the Pastoral Epistles, suffering is portrayed as gifted, participatory, ecclesial, appointed, and universal. This demonstrates that Paul’s theology of suffering is systematic rather than occasional.

The study also shows that Paul’s theology offers a direct challenge to prosperity-oriented frameworks that equate faith with comfort, success, or material abundance. In contrast, Paul normalizes suffering as an essential component of discipleship and spiritual maturity. This correction is particularly significant in African contexts, where prosperity theology often dominates Christian discourse amid widespread poverty, insecurity, and social instability (Bowler, 2013, pp. 79–84).

Within African realities, Paul’s theology provides a powerful interpretive framework. It dignifies suffering without glorifying pain, offering hope amid poverty, persecution, unemployment, and political instability. Adoption assures belonging amid rejection, sanctification offers transformation amid pain, and glorification anchors believers in future hope. In this way, Paul’s theology speaks not only to the first-century church but also to contemporary African Christianity with remarkable relevance (Bediako, 2004, pp. 120–128).

Empirical and pastoral reflections further strengthen this theological argument. Contemporary Christian communities continue to embody Paul’s theology existentially. Whether among persecuted believers, displaced communities, struggling clergy, unemployed youths, or marginalized populations, suffering remains one of the principal means through which Christian identity is negotiated and formed.

Ultimately, Paul presents suffering not as an interruption to Christian identity but as one of its primary contributors. Through adoption, believers learn who they are. Through sanctification, they become who they are called to be. Through glorification, they discover who they will ultimately become. This theological vision remains one of the most profound contributions of Pauline theology to Christian spirituality, pastoral care, and ecclesial formation.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Theological Education: Seminaries, Bible colleges, and theological institutions should intentionally integrate the theology of suffering into ministerial formation and discipleship curricula. Future Christian leaders must be equipped with a biblically grounded understanding of suffering to effectively guide believers through adversity.



2. Pastoral Ministry and Counseling: Pastors and church leaders should develop pastoral models that interpret suffering through Paul's framework of adoption, sanctification, and glorification. Counseling ministries should emphasize suffering as formative rather than merely problematic.
3. Correcting Prosperity-Oriented Theology: Churches should critically engage prosperity theology and teach a balanced biblical theology that recognizes divine blessing without denying the inevitability and formative value of suffering.
4. Strengthening Ecclesial Solidarity: Christian communities should cultivate structures of mutual comfort, support, and solidarity, reflecting Paul's theology in 2 Corinthians where comfort received becomes comfort shared.
5. Contextual African Theology: African theologians should continue developing contextual readings of Pauline suffering theology that address African existential realities such as poverty, persecution, insecurity, corruption, and displacement.
6. Interdisciplinary Research: Future studies should integrate theology with psychology, sociology, resilience studies, and counseling to deepen understanding of how suffering shapes Christian identity.
7. Empirical Studies: Further qualitative and quantitative research should be conducted among contemporary churches to assess how believers interpret suffering and how it contributes to spiritual formation.
8. Gender-Sensitive Theological Reflection: Future scholarship should explore how suffering is differently experienced across gender, age, social class, and vocational categories, particularly in African ecclesial settings.

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