

## **2 Corinthians 4:7-15 and the Challenges of Christian Mission in Northern Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

2 Corinthians 4:7-15 deals with St. Paul's attempt to defend his sufferings. It seems to make him look weak in the sight of the Corinthians, but from his perspective, his affliction highlights the agency and power of God. So, despite his crushing affliction and persecution, he does not despair. Instead, he presses on because his sufferings embody the pattern expressed in the death and resurrection of Christ. Like St. Paul, Ministers of the Gospel in Northern Nigeria are passing through a lot of persecution and circumscription to freedom of religion from Islamic terrorist groups like Boko Haram, Fulani herdsmen etc. As a result, lives have been lost, properties destroyed, Churches have been destroyed and deserted in some places. This work employs the historical-critical method of exegesis in interpreting 2 Cor 4:7-15 in the context of Christian mission in Northern Nigeria. This work argues that if 2 Cor 4:7-15 is properly studied and understood, Ministers of the Gospel would persevere and continually take active steps in the spread of the gospel irrespective of the setbacks because God is its source.

**Key words:** Christian mission, Northern Nigeria, ministers, gospel, suffering

## 0. Introduction

The Pauline letters bear witness to the prominent role that suffering plays both in the life of Paul and in the lives of the communities to whom he writes. His presentation of the word of God as a dynamic entity which propels its bearers outward in mission provides the most significant theological basis for missionary activities.<sup>1</sup> This word determines both the Church's identity and missionary activity in the world. If the above is a correct understanding of Paul, then one would expect the apostle to describe both himself and his churches as undergoing some of the same experiences and participating in the mission of Christ.

2 Corinthians 4:7-15 deals with Paul's attempt to defend his apostolic sufferings. He is subject to afflictions, bewilderment, persecution, being "struck down" (vv. 8-9); and as a mere "mortal flesh" who is constantly being "handed over to death", his body is the bearer of "the dying of Jesus" (v. 10). Paul's sufferings are "on account of Jesus" (v. 11), so that "life" may be "at work" among the Corinthians (v. 11). Paul models himself upon Christ Jesus himself (see Phil 2:7-8).<sup>2</sup>

As a result of this vivid portrayal, through Paul's experience of "death" by repeated suffering, he delivers "the life of Jesus" (i.e., salvation) to his addressees (vv. 10-12). Margaret E. Thrall takes a similar view of 2 Corinthians 4:7-15, commenting:

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Plummer, "A Theological Basis for the Church's Mission in Paul," *WTJ* 64 (2002): 253-71.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: William E. Eerdmans, 1997), 228.

The apostolate is the earthly manifestation of the gospel, and apostolic suffering plays a part in this: it is the epiphany in somatic form of the Christ who was crucified. The repeated *phanerōthē* of vv. 10b, 11b would support this interpretation, as would the general context, which is concerned with the presentation of the gospel (4:2-5, 13).<sup>3</sup>

Likewise, Victor Paul Furnish notes about this text: “The apostle’s sufferings ... are the manifestation of [Christ’s] suffering and death and thus a proclamation of the gospel”.<sup>4</sup>

Like Paul, Ministers of the Gospel in Northern Nigeria are passing through a lot of persecution from Islamic terrorist groups like Boko Haram, Fulani herdsmen etc. As a result, some were kidnapped; some lost their lives and properties; some churches were destroyed and deserted in some places. This work employs the historical-critical method of exegesis in interpreting 2 Cor 4:7-15 in the context of Christian mission in Northern Nigeria. This work argues that if 2 Cor 4:7-15 is properly studied and understood, Christians would persevere and continually take active steps in the spread of the gospel irrespective of the setbacks because God is its source.

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<sup>3</sup> Margaret E. Thrall, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians, vol. 1, Introduction and Commentary on II Corinthians I-VII* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994), 334.

## 1. 2 Corinthians 4:7-15 within the Larger Context of 2 Cor 4:7-5:10

2 Corinthians 4:7-5:10 contains a second section of Paul's so-called (first) apology. A characteristic reflection comes clearly to the fore, a reflection that concerns the outward appearance and inward condition of Christian ministry. Paul meditates on the paradox of a process of death that bears within itself, and already manifests, life, and that ultimately, through the resurrection, will culminate in an eternally lasting and glorious existence.<sup>4</sup> What is mortal will, finally, be swallowed up by what is life (cf. 5:4). Because Paul reflects here on the relationship between his suffering and eventual glory, we can to some extent separate this section from what precedes (2:14-4:6) and what follows (5:11-7:4). From 4:7 onward there is no longer the opposition between the old covenant (and Moses as its minister) and the new covenant (and Paul as its minister). In 5:11-6:10 Paul will again defend himself and reflect on his ministry of reconciliation.<sup>5</sup>

Two subdivisions should be distinguished in 4:7-5:10. In the first, 4:7-15, Paul pays more attention to the suffering of the "present time"; in the second, 4:16-5:10, he points to what ministers and Christians may expect of the "future". This is one reason for a differentiation within this section. In 4:7-15 Paul is more explicitly

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<sup>4</sup> Victor Paul Furnish, *II Corinthians*, AB, vol. 32A (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984), 284.

<sup>5</sup> Jan Lambrecht, *Second Corinthians*, Daniel J. Harrington (ed.) Sacra Pagina Series, no. 8 (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 76.

occupied with the addressees, the people for whom he lives, to whom he preaches.<sup>6</sup>

In 4:16-5:10 he considers rather the destiny of all Christians. The opposition “we-you” of the first unit seems to disappear in the second. One may assume that the “you” of the first unit is included in the use of “we” in that second. These are two separate units, to be sure, but between them there are many connecting links as far as the vocabulary and content are concerned. The subject matter of the second unit is already announced in the first (see 4:14: the final outcome), and Paul in the second unit (see 4:16-18) treats further the theme of suffering which is dealt with in the first.

## **2. Stylistic and Literary Features in 2Cor 4:7-15**

There are several interesting stylistic and literary features in 4:7-15. Apart from the series of the four antithetical statements in vv. 8-9, the paradox between “life” and “death” is juxtaposed three times in vv. 10-12. And “seen” and “unseen” (v.18), while the present and the future are held together in uneasy tension by Paul’s hyperbolic reference to “light affliction” he now experiences, offset by his future expectation of a “weight of glory,” which is part of the age to come (“eternal” v. 17).<sup>7</sup> The pericope is loaded with four *hina* clauses that

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<sup>6</sup> Lambrecht, *Second Corinthians*, 76.

<sup>7</sup> Ralph Martin, “2 Corinthians”, in *40 Word Biblical Commentary* (Waco, Texas: Wood Books Publishers), 83.

highlight the divine purpose revolving around the story of Jesus within Paul's experience of suffering.

It is also interesting to note that there is a strikingly similarity in terms of theme and vocabulary in 4:7-15. In terms of theme: (1) Paul's sufferings are linked to the sufferings of Christ (see 1:5; 2:14 and 8-9); (2) the motif of Paul as the mediator of salvation is evident (see 1:6' 2:15-16a and 4:12); (3) the motifs of life and death are juxtaposed with each other (see 1:8-9; 2:15-16 and 4:10-12); (4) the intended human response as a result of Paul's apostolic ministry is emphasized (see 1:11; 2:15-16 and 4:12).

Finally, in describing his apostolic sufferings, Paul clearly has himself in view as indicated by the distinction of the first person and second person personal pronouns. This sharing contrast is clearly spelt out in *en hēmin... en humin* (4:12); *hēmas sun Iēsou...sun humin* (4:14) and *di'humas* (4:15). This distinction serves the purpose of Paul's defence of Gospel of Christ and its beneficiaries, the Corinthians.<sup>8</sup>

## **2.1 The Text of 2 Corinthians 4:7-15 (NRSV)**

But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck

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<sup>8</sup> Martin, "2 Corinthians", 83-84.

down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you. But just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture—"I believed, and so I spoke"-- we also believe, and so we speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence. Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

## **2.2 Structure of 2 Cor 4:7-15**

A division of 4:7-15 into three (unequal) parts appears to be justified: vv. 7-12, 13-14, and 15. In vv. 7-12 Paul begins with the statement that the apostle has the treasure of his ministry in clay vessels. This must be so to show that the extraordinary apostolic power belongs to God and does not come from the apostle himself (v. 7). Paul formulates the antitheses of vv. 8-9 out of his own experience and thus illustrates what he intends to say by the opening opposition in v. 7 between fragile and powerful to demonstrate that the power 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.<sup>9</sup> In vv. 10 and 11, by means of subtle variations, Paul basically depicts the same antithesis of dying and remaining alive, yet he now reflects upon the Christological dimension of his apostolic existence. Both the death and life of the apostle are connected with the death and life of Jesus. Verse 12 marks a conclusion, but it strikes the reader that Paul brings about a shift. He now restricts death to the apostle and life to the Corinthian Christians.<sup>10</sup>

In v. 13 we have a new beginning indicated by the particle *de* (“but, however”). Paul no longer insists that, notwithstanding his dying, there is life, already now here on earth. In the complex sentence construction of vv. 13-14, he explains that his apostolic activity of proclamation is grounded in his faith conviction; it is also grounded in his certainty of a final outcome, his resurrection after death – firmly based on Christ’s past resurrection – and what can be called a gathering forever of all Christians in the presence of Jesus or God.<sup>11</sup>

With v. 15 Paul both summarizes and motivates the main ideas of the first two parts. Suffering and preaching occur for the sake of the Corinthians.<sup>12</sup> Then, by means of abundant terms and phrases, the last purpose clause

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<sup>9</sup> Scott Hafemann, “‘Because of Weakness’ [Galatians 4:13]: The Role of Suffering in the Mission of Paul,” in *The Gospel to the Nations: Perspectives on Paul’s Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 137.

<sup>10</sup> Lambrecht, *Second Corinthians*, 76.

<sup>11</sup> Lambrecht, *Second Corinthians*, 76.

<sup>12</sup> John S. Pobee, “Persecution and Martyrdom in the Theology of Paul” in *JSNTSup 6* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), 106.

points out the ultimate aim of all apostolic activity, namely the glory of God. People are to be persuaded to be thankful. God's free gift of the ministry should lead to giving thanks to God. Having thus increased the thanksgiving by many people, the gift itself overflows to the glory of God. We can summarize the structure thus:

vv. 7-12           The power of God made manifest in weakness.

vv. 13-14           Faith in God as the basis of apostolic ministry

v. 15               Paul's suffering and preaching in relation to the Corinthians

### **3. Exegetical Analysis of 2 Corinthians 4:7-15**

The exegetical analysis would be carried out based on the structure of the text.

#### **Verses 7-12: The power of God made manifest in weakness.**

*De* ("but") in v. 7 sets up a contrast with the foregoing. Paul has extolled the glory of the Gospel, which focuses its beams that shine from God's act to spotlight the supreme revelation in the person/face of Jesus Christ. In him we see the knowledge of God displayed in its glorious form and light. But Paul's thought quickly turns to the realities of the situation of his missionary labours; there is no nimbus of glory surrounding the messengers of such glorious Gospel. Rather they are as *ostrakon* ("clay-pot"), a thought of human frailty in human

weakness.<sup>13</sup> Hence, the statement, *echomen de ton thēsauron touton en ostraknoisskeuesin* (We have this treasure, however, in clay jars).

In this new passage introduced by *de* (but), Paul sets out to explain the paradox stated in 2:14-16. Although his ministry imparts life (2:6) and brings the Spirit of God (3:3) and the glory of God (4:4, 6), in himself he suffers humiliation in God's triumphal procession (2:14) and the basis of his ministry is that of a slave, the crucified Christ (4:5). Those things that the Corinthians and their new teachers disdain in him, that is, his missionary sufferings, he now declares to be fundamental to ministry that faithfully represents the Crucified One.

The human vessel bearing "this treasure," is a mere "jar of clay." But this is for a divine purpose – stated positively and negatively – that the "all-surpassing power might be (1) "from God," and (2) "not from us." The verb, *echomen* (we have) in the first part of the verse occurs several times in the immediate context of the letter, where Paul is reflecting upon the new covenant ministry.<sup>14</sup> Apostolic life is lived by the whole person and its tribulations are not undergone by the body alone, but also by the "inside" of the person. It should be recognized, however, that with the terms "jar", "body", and "flesh", Paul stresses the visible "outside" of the apostle. In the image "clay jar" it is probably the nuances of fragility and weakness that prevail over that of total dependency (cf. Rom. 9:19-24: clay, jar, and artisan) or

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<sup>13</sup> Martin, "2 Corinthians", 83-85.

<sup>14</sup> Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 229.

that of instrumentality (see Acts 9:15: a “chosen vessel”).

*Hina hē hyperbolētēs dunameōs hē tou theou kai mē ez hēmōn* (In order that the excess of power be God’s and not from us): This is the first of four purpose clauses in this passage, all introduced by *hina* (“in order that,” see also vv. 10, 11b, and 15b). All these clauses point to an aim but also to something of a conclusion, a consequence. “The excess (or surplus) of power” indicates the exceeding power inherent in the apostolic preaching and operative in the adverse circumstances surrounding that preaching. In Rom 1:16 and 1 Cor1:18 the gospel and the word of the cross are referred to as “the power of God”. Therefore, the use of the term “power” may carry a more or less technical nuance here. The construction “God’s” and “from us” is asymmetrical (we do not read: “from God”).

Verse 8: *En panti* (in every way) presumably applies to the four antitheses of vv. 8-9 and not only to the first; later in the passage the expression is reinforced by *pantote* (v. 10, “always”) and *aei* (v. 11, “always”), both terms also at the beginning of a clause. Verses 8-10 form a cluster of participles grammatically, it would seem, in apposition to the subject “we” in *echomen* (“we have”) at the beginning of v. 7, or they may be absolute participles that stand in place of independent personal verbs (cf. our translation). Verses 8-9 represent the first of the “tribulation lists” (*peristaseis*) found within 2 Corinthians (see 6:4-10; 11:23-29; 12:10).<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Lambrecht, *Second Corinthians*, 72.

*En panti thlibomenoi all' ouk ex aporoumenoi* (we are hard pressed, but not confined; at a loss, but not in despair): The first member of each antithesis in vv. 8-9 indicates an apostolic hardship; the second is introduced each time by “but not” and refers, it would seem, to the presence of God’s power. By itself the grammar does not require strict simultaneity: hard-pressed, but (at the same time) not confined. Posteriority of the second member is also possible. In all eight members we have a present participle in the nominative plural ending in *menoi*. In the second antithesis there is a play on words: *aporoumenoi all' ouk exaporoumenoi*, in a literal translation “at a loss, but not utterly at a loss”.<sup>16</sup> Commentators refer to Paul’s concession in 1:8c (“so that we despaired even of living”); one should not interpret the two verses 1:8c and 4:8b as contradictory, since in the latter verse Paul’s attention moves to the effect of God’s power.

Some maintain that the clauses that in vv. 8-9 follow *all' ouk* (“but not”) do not indicate God’s intervention but point to the very limit of suffering (“but not yet”): utterly miserable, almost dead. In the whole of vv. 8-9, Paul depicts his hardships and vulnerability. Only in vv. 7b, 10b, and 11b is there reference to God’s power or Jesus’ life. This interpretation, however, fails to account for the antithetical force of *ouk alla* (cf. also 4:16).

Verse 9: *diō komenoi all'ouk egkataleipomenoi, kataballomenoi all' ouk apollumenoi* (persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed): The

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<sup>16</sup> Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 235.

verb, *egkatalaipomenoi* (“abandoned”) is a *hapax legomenon* in Paul, recurring only once more in the whole New Testament: “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me” (see Mark 15:34). Some claim that Paul refers to the passion narrative. This, however, seems very unlikely since he would be contradicting Jesus. The latter member of the fourth antithesis stresses that there is no total loss of life, no actual death but in a context that deals with persecution, that is, the suffering which come upon him daily in his work for the Gospel.<sup>17</sup>

Verse 10: *pantote tēn nekrōsin tou Iēsou en tō sōmati peripherontes* (always carrying the putting to death of Jesus in the body): In Paul (and the New Testament) the Greek term *nekrosis* occurs only twice and means either the dead condition, the deadness (Rom 4:19) or, here, the process of “mortification”, of putting to death. It is not the Christian’s burial into death by baptism (see Rom 6:3-10), but what causes death during the entire life of the apostle.<sup>18</sup> Verse 10a summarizes and qualifies in a Christological way what is expressed in vv. 8-9, as well as in v. 7a: apostolic suffering and fragility are not just human pain caused by opposition and persecution. No, the putting to death of Jesus himself is present in it, visible in the body of the apostle.

In vv. 10, 11, and 14, Paul, contrary to his habit, refers to Christ simply as “Jesus” (see already in 4:5). By so referring to his Lord he may want to parallel his own suffering with that endured by the earthly Jesus and thus

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<sup>17</sup> Charles K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 140.

<sup>18</sup> Lambrecht, *Second Corinthians*, 73.

to present his own suffering as a continuation of that of Jesus. However, the expression “the life of Jesus” in vv. 10b and 11b indicates that for Paul the earthly Jesus is not separated from the risen, glorified Christ.<sup>19</sup> It may be going too far to assume that the phrase “another Jesus” in 11:4 suggests that with “Jesus” in 4:10-14 Paul criticizes the opponents’ Christology that – it is claimed – neglects the suffering of Christ and his sacrificial death.

*Hina kai hē zōe tou Iēsou en tō sōmati hēmōn phanerōthē* (In order that the life of Jesus be also manifested in our body): This purpose clause continues the Christological characterization present already in v. 10a. Its formulation, contrary to that of the second member in the antitheses (“but not”), is positive. Together with the purpose clause of v. 7b it frames the whole of vv. 7-10. The content of both vv. 10b and 7b is similar: “the life of Jesus” corresponds to “the power of God.” The aim of the apostle’s dying is the visible, bodily manifestation of Jesus’ life (i.e., God’s power).<sup>20</sup>

Verse 11: With the concluding sentence, connected by *gar* (for) to what precedes, Paul explains v. 10 by basically recapitulating what he said there.<sup>21</sup> “*For we who live are always given up to death because of Jesus*”: Paul must have sensed that the *nekrosis* language of v. 10 is not that easy to grasp. He now clarifies his ideas (“for”). At first sight v. 10 and v. 11 look like parallels in

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<sup>19</sup> Lambrecht, *Second Corinthians*, 73.

<sup>20</sup> Lambrecht, *Second Corinthians*, 73.

<sup>21</sup> Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 229.

both structure and vocabulary as well as in content. Verse 11, however, is grammatically speaking an independent sentence. In v. 11a “in the body” is missing, but “we who live” (literally: “we the living ones”) is added. In place of the genitive “of Jesus” we have the motivating “because of Jesus”.<sup>22</sup> The passive construction, “we are given up to death” replaces the active “carrying the putting to death”. The identification of Paul’s suffering with Jesus’ dying (v.10a) disappears, yet the choice of the specific verb “we are given up” to death may be motivated by Paul’s interpretation of his suffering in close relationship to Jesus’ “having been given up” to death (probably a term already present in the tradition (cf. Mark 9:31; 10:33; 14:18, 21)).<sup>23</sup>

*Hina kai hē zōe tou Iēsou phanerōthē en tē thnētē sarki hēmōn* (in order that the life of Jesus be also manifested in our mortal flesh): Notwithstanding its symmetry with v. 10b, the purpose clause in v. 11b presents the following deviations: the place of the verb in the middle of the clause, “flesh” instead of “body”, and the addition of “mortal”.<sup>24</sup>

The changes in both v. 11a and v. 11b thus modify the structure when compared with that of v. 10. Three particular features should be noted. (1) We can detect in v. 11 a chiasmic structure: the verbs in v. 11a and v. 11b stand in the middle; at the beginning of v. 11a we have “we who live” and at the end of v. 11b “in our mortal flesh”; at the end of v. 11a we find “for Jesus’ sake” and

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<sup>22</sup> Lambrecht, *Second Corinthians*, 73.

<sup>23</sup> Lambrecht, *Second Corinthians*, 73.

<sup>24</sup> Lambrecht, *Second Corinthians*, 73.

at the beginning of v. 11b “the life of Jesus”. (2) The opposition between death and life is made explicit in both clauses of v. 11 (compare death in v. 10a and life in v. 10b). (3) Whereas in v. 10 the being-put-to-death of Jesus stands over against his life, in v. 11 the opposition is between “we, the living ones” who are always being given up to death (v. 11a) and “the life of Jesus” which is manifested in our mortal flesh (v. 11b). Hence, whereas as an apostle, Paul is always in danger of being killed because of his proclamation of the Gospel, the fact that he is still alive testifies to the resurrection life of Jesus.<sup>25</sup>

Verse 12: *hōste ho thanatos en hēmin en ergeitai, hē de zōe en humin* (so death is at work in us, but life in you): The initial *hōste* (so then) introduces the conclusion of his “death...life” line of thought (vv. 10-11), but there is an unexpected twist. He begins by saying that “death is at work in us,” meaning “always carrying about the dying of Jesus” (v. 10) and always being handed over to death” (v. 11) but, to our surprise, the life side of the equation is no longer “in us” as before in vv. 10-11, but “in you [Corinthians].” There are benefits for the Corinthians as recipients of the apostolic ministry in Paul’s suffering: “so death is at work in us, but life in you” (v. 12).<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Corinthians-A Literary and Theological Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 157.

<sup>26</sup> Talbert, *Reading Corinthians*, 157.

## **Verses 13-14: Faith in God as the basis of apostolic ministry**

*Echontes de to auto pneumatēs pisteōs*: Paul now begins a new section explaining how “life is at work in you [Corinthians]” v. 12, that is, by his speaking, an explanation he will amplify in v.14 (God “will raise...you”) and conclude in v. 15 (“everything is for you”). But the verse also resumes the theme of the revelatory character of the apostolic office, which had been expressed in positive terms as “setting forth the truth” (v.2) and in negative terms as non-resignation from “this ministry” (4:1). By commencing the verse with “having,” Paul specifically picks up these themes, in particular v.1, which also commences with “having” (see 3:12; 4:7).<sup>27</sup>

The opening words *echontes de* (but having) are causal in intent, and connect with the key phrase in the sentence, “therefore also we speak”. Such speaking, however, issues from faith, a linkage he finds echoed in the sentiments of the Psalm that he quotes (see Ps 116:10). Basing himself on the psalmist’s example, but in different circumstances, Paul declares, *kai hēmeis pisteuomen, dio kai laloumen* (we too believe; therefore, we also speak out). That the apostle “speaks” is, of course, fundamental to the apostolic ministry, as witnessed by the frequency of the verb “speak”. The implied object of his “speaking” is “the word of God”

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<sup>27</sup> Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 240.

(2:17; 4:2), “the gospel” (4:4), “Jesus Christ as Lord” (4:5).<sup>28</sup>

Verse 14: *eidotes hōti* (knowing that) gives the basis for Paul’s “believing...speaking” of the previous verse. It is because of what he “knows” that he “believes” and “speaks.” This verse supplies an eschatological reason for Paul’s verbal ministry. The eschatological note says, *ho egairas ton kurion Iēsoun* (because we know that the One who raised the Lord Jesus). Significantly, the participle *egairas* (raised) is in the aorist tense, indicating a completed act, in this context occurring in the past.<sup>29</sup>

The second part of the sentence uses the verb, *egerei* (verb indicative future active 3rd person singular) but in the future tense, with its object “us” (Paul, but speaking representatively). It is striking that the words “God will raise us,” Paul adds *sun Iēsou* (with Jesus) as if to suggest the closeness in principle, if not in time, of future resurrection of believers and the past resurrection of Jesus.<sup>30</sup> The phrase “with Jesus”, of course, cannot be understood as if Jesus would rise once more in the future. Paul means something like “just as Jesus in the past” or, better, “owing to our union with him”. One should not admit a non-eschatological, present-life sense of the verb “raise”. The meaning is not: God will raise us, over and over again, to a full Christian life before death.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 240.

<sup>29</sup> Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 242.

<sup>30</sup> Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 242.

<sup>31</sup> Lambrecht, *Second Corinthians*, 75.

*Kai parastēsei sun humin* (and place us together with you (in his presence): The place where Paul and the other Christians will be found is not indicated. The phrase could refer to a “tribunal”, meaning that they are to account for their deeds on the last day (see 5:10). It seems, however, more likely that Paul has in view here a future state of being “in the presence” of Jesus or God (see 1 Cor. 1:9; 1 Thess. 4:17; 5:10). Again, a present-life understanding of this clause is to be rejected: Paul does not say that within the course of ongoing history on earth God will present Paul, together with the Corinthian believers, to the public forum, that is, the world.<sup>32</sup>

### **Verse 15: Paul’s suffering and preaching in relation to the Corinthians**

The initial *gar* (for) leads into a summary explanation of vv. 13-14, and vv. 7-12. Thus, various elements of this verse reiterate words and ideas from earlier verses in the passage. The “you” [for whom] all things [are]”, looks back to “life is at work in you” (v.12) and to [God] will present you” (v. 14).<sup>33</sup> The Corinthians, as the Church currently addressed, are in mind. As for the “all things” that are “for you”, we would include: 1) Paul’s speaking the word of God (v. 13), and 2) the apostolic sufferings listed (vv.8-9), which he calls the “dying of Jesus” (v.10), “death” that is “working in him” (v.12).<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Lambrecht, *Second Corinthians*, 75.

<sup>33</sup> Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 244.

<sup>34</sup> Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 244.

Thus, Paul is saying that his suffering and speaking are for the Corinthians, in order that the increasing grace of God, of which the suffering and speaking are evidences, may overflow to the Corinthians through the thanksgiving of an increased number of people, to the glory of God.

#### **4. Summary**

2 Corinthians 4:7-15 gives a theological apologia for Paul's suffering. The apostle explains that the reason that the gospel (i.e., the "treasure") is found in such a beat-up earthen vessel or clay pot (i.e., in Paul) is that his weakness and suffering serve to magnify the truth and power of the message. The apostles' trials and hardship show that they cannot be the source of the powerful message they convey and point their audience to God. For Paul, suffering does not only accompany the apostles' proclamation of the gospel but is a proclamation of the gospel. This fact is made clear by Paul's metaphorical descriptions of his afflictions as "carrying in [his own] body the death of Jesus" (4:10). Paul views his sufferings as picturing, in some sense, Jesus' death. Therefore, Paul completes what is 'lacking' in Christ's afflictions on behalf of the Church in the sense that his ministry extends the knowledge and reality of the cross of Christ and the power of the Spirit to the Gentile world (see Col 1:23; cf. Eph 3:13).<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Hafemann, "'Because of Weakness' (Galatians 4:13): The Role of Suffering in the Mission of Paul," 920.

## **5. The Situation of Christian Mission in Northern Nigeria**

The situation of Christianity in Northern Nigeria, as already pointed out, is no stranger to attacks targeted at Christians. In years past, Christian missionary activities used to be vibrant. Despite this vibrancy, the future of the Church is at stake because of persecution. This refers to any hostility experienced because of one's identification as a Christian. From verbal harassment to hostile feelings, attitudes, beatings, physical torture, confinement, isolation, rape, severe punishment, imprisonment, denial of Certificate of Occupancy (C of O) for lands where church buildings are already in place, abductions and forced marriages of young and under-aged Christian girls, discrimination in education and employment etc.

Although the North is officially not at war, but what the Church is witnessing is tantamount to a declaration of war against Christian mission. Especially in rural areas, Christians are being killed and dispossessed of their ancestral farmlands. Their homes are being burnt and many have been internally displaced or taken refuge in neighbouring countries such as Cameroon, Niger, and Chad. Others are in captivity and slavery. The government feeds the public and international community with misleading narratives and explanations for the terror.

Many Christians are discouraged by systemic injustice and the lack of government redress. Some see the

Church as helpless in fighting back. They conclude that the Church leadership is irrelevant to their survival and protection, having failed to negotiate with the political class. Consequently, some are returning to idolatry, syncretism, African Traditional Religions, drugs, and occultism. If this situation continues, the decline of evangelization could be a matter of years away. Some who have endured decades of persecution and who have been willing to die for their faith, are beginning to experience faith fatigue and discouragement.

### **5.1. 2 Corinthians 4:7-15 and the Challenges of Christian Mission in Northern Nigeria**

Paul, during his life as an apostle, was no stranger to suffering. He dedicates himself not only to carry the message of those sufferings to the nations, but also to suffer with Christ and for Christ in such a way that what people see are ‘Christ’s sufferings’. In this way, he follows the pattern of Christ by laying down his life for the life of the church.<sup>36</sup> Thus, what the messengers of the Gospel endure by way of suffering in this present age is both an evangelistic witness (v.15) and a witness to the world of the coming, righteous judgment of God (see 2 Thess. 1:4-10).<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> John Piper, *Let the Nations be Glad! The Supremacy of God in Missions* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 94.

<sup>37</sup> Robert B. Sloan, “Images of the Church in Paul”, in Paul Basden and David S. Dockery (eds.), *The People of God: Essays on the Believers’ Church* (Nashville: Broadman, 1991), 164.

Like Paul, Ministers of the Gospel in Northern Nigeria experience a great deal of suffering. Unlike Paul, the response to this suffering is generally far from positive. While it is true that Paul did, at times, attribute suffering to punishment for sins, it is clear from the text that his understanding of suffering was, overall, far more positive.

The many affirmative purposes that Paul ascribes to suffering, not to mention the example of the life of Christ Himself, must be used to broaden the Ministers of the Gospel's attitude to suffering. Paul clearly teaches that the innocent does suffer, and that this suffering can be used by God for His glory. Suffering does not necessarily indicate the presence of sin in the life of the person who suffers. Paul's life and that of the One he imitates, Jesus Christ, become clear demonstrations that suffering does not automatically result from sin, or is due to punishment. God's power is manifested in human weakness, as a demonstration, and authentication, of the gospel. It must be understood that the story of Christ is of One, who suffered and died; and then, through the power of God, was raised from the dead. The cross of Christ is the paradigm for a pastoral agent's understanding of both suffering and power. Suffering, in the life of the believer, can be viewed as a demonstration of the reality of the cross.

2 Corinthians 4:7-15 teaches Ministers of the Gospel in the Northern Nigeria that they can expect to share in the sufferings of Christ, and, indeed, that suffering should be seen as an integral aspect of being called through Baptism to be ministers of God. Suffering, thus, changes

from being a sign of punishment to a badge of honour, worn for Christ. While Paul did not run from affliction, or necessarily ascribe it to divine wrath, he nevertheless displayed a dread and fear of it.

## **5. Conclusion**

The Corinthians were comfortable with “God’s power” being displayed in Paul’s ministry, but not so comfortable with the suffering. They viewed the suffering as a negation of God’s power, quite the opposite of the way Paul viewed it. 2 Corinthians 4:7-15 shows that human weakness becomes a platform for the display of God’s power. This was displayed most vividly in the work of Jesus Christ, in His human existence. The divine power, which was evident in Christ’s life, and which raised Him from the dead, is the same power, which strengthens Paul, and enables him to endure his sufferings. Consequently, Paul’s afflictions and the power, which is at work in him in these weaknesses, allow Paul’s life to be a reflection of the death and resurrection of Christ (4:10-11), and thus confirm his apostolic ministry and gospel message.

Paul’s teaching on suffering is not an abstract theology, but the fruit of his extensive personal experience of many and varied afflictions. This experience has, as its locus, the cross of Christ. As a result, Paul’s sufferings provide a model for Ministers of the Gospel in Northern Nigeria. His response to his afflictions, and his understanding of their purpose in the divine plan, indicate that it is possible for the Christian to view suffering positively and endure it. Indeed, suffering may even be seen as the authenticating mark of a genuine

Christian ministry. The good person can suffer, and this does not necessarily indicate an absence of God's power. Instead, God's power can become evident in this weakness.

Ministers of the Gospel in Northern Nigeria should intensify their prayers and endure whatever afflictions they are passing through since weakness is a direct path to power. Like Paul who suffered for the sake of the Corinthians, the ministers of the Gospel should speak up for those who cannot speak up. "Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked" (see Psa 82:3, 4). God calls His people to be a voice for the voiceless in their suffering and injustice, for example, signing petitions, writing to our representatives in Congress, etc. "Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute" (Prov. 31:8).