

SUFFERING IN MISSION IN THE CONTEXT OF MISSIONS: LESSONS FOR THE MELANESIAN CHURCH

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INTRODUCTION

The issue of suffering in the church in Melanesia is not a popular one, and does not go down well with many Christians. The persecuted church, in countries where Christian faith cannot be tolerated, has a different view. For them, suffering, inflicted through persecution, is seen as an identification with the suffering Christ. According to Wurmbrand, "Christians wear chains with the gladness with which a bride wears a precious jewel received from her beloved. They receive His kiss and His embraces, and would not change places with kings."¹

For the persecuted church, suffering and death is the norm, and, therefore, much of its time is taken up with life and death, the way of the cross, in contrast to the church in the "free world",² which focuses more on prosperity and health, power and victory. However, the victory of Jesus seems to be paramount over other issues. Jesus' victory over death, thus defeating Satan, is the reality of the Christian life, and that is what the church in Melanesia is used to. Hence, suffering is not preached much to Melanesian believers.

¹ R. Wurmbrand, "Priestly Robes or Prison Clothes?", in *The Voice of the Martyrs* (February, 2001), p. 2.

² "Free world" here implies countries that tolerate the Christian faith.

The Easter messages of the cross always end in the victory aspect, with the application of living victorious lives, because Jesus has defeated all iniquities on the cross. These include the work of the enemy, illnesses, and all forms of suffering. Hence, it is supposed that any existence of such suffering today is unacceptable, and must be rebuked. The local church is no exception to this. The issue of suffering is abstract to believers. Perhaps the contributing factors could be the lack of theological teaching, and other theological influences.³

With the church slowly accepting the challenge of mission, the grave concern is how the issue of suffering in mission can be accepted. The purpose of this paper is two-fold: firstly, to help the church to understand and accept the fact that suffering in mission is the way of the cross, and, secondly, to challenge those who intend to go into mission work about the reality of suffering, for which they, themselves, must be prepared. Hence, it focuses on the theme “suffering in mission, in the context of missions”, which will be approached along the flow of God’s redemptive purposes, from Abraham to the cross.

In the light of these, this article attempts to do the following: develop a biblical theology of the relationship between suffering and mission, to look at some missiological examples in the Old Testament (particularly Abraham, Moses, and the prophet Jeremiah), to look at the suffering of Jesus and Paul in the New Testament, and to suggest lessons for the local church to learn. However, before the issues can be discussed, the need to clarify the use of the words “mission” and “missions” is necessary, so as to avoid confusion in the process of discussion.

MISSION AND MISSIONS

Although the words “mission” and “missions” are not the main issue of discussion, the use of these words, in the process, is unavoidable. Missions scholars have given two separate meanings to the two words “mission” and “missions”: The word “mission” can be understood as the

³ Other theologies here imply getting information from other theological resources, without first testing their doctrines and backgrounds. For example, from “prosperity” television preachers.

church, as the body of Christ, sent into the world, while “missions” is the sending of missionaries out of the church, or the body of Christ, to proclaim the gospel.⁴

SUFFERING AND MISSION

Firstly, before discussing the relationship of suffering and mission, it may be helpful to briefly look at suffering, in a general sense. Suffering, in a general sense, has many causes, and affects people of all races, cultures, gender, and religion. According to John Stott, “Suffering comes in many unwelcome forms”,⁵ and has much impact, physically, psychologically, and mentally. Richard adds, “Suffering is a universal, and most common experience, for human beings. No one escapes it, and, as such, suffering functions as a common denominator.”⁶ Stott gives some causes of suffering, which affect the world:

“Firstly, according to the Bible, suffering is an alien intrusion onto God’s good world, and will have no part in His new universe. . . . Secondly, suffering is often due to sin . . . originally, disease and death entered the world. . . . Thirdly, suffering is due to our human sensitivity to pain. . . . Fourthly, suffering is due to the kind of environment, in which God has placed us. Although most human suffering is caused by human sin, natural disasters . . . are not.”⁷

Similarly, Jones suggests nine avenues of suffering: “1. Suffering from confused counsels in religion. . . . 2. Suffering from wars and conflicts in human society. . . . 3. Suffering from physical calamities in nature, such

⁴ G. W. Peters, *A Biblical Theology of Missions*, Chicago IL: Moody Press, 1972, p. 11. See also the following authors, A. Willis Jr, *Biblical Basis of Missions*, Nashville TN: Convention Press, 1979, p. 11; G. Van Rheen, *Biblical Foundations and Contemporary Strategies of Missions*, Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1996, p. 20; W. C. Kaiser Jr, *Mission in the Old Testament*, Grand Rapids MI: Baker Book House, 2000, pp. 11, 85; J. Nissen, *New Testament and Mission*, Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1999, p. 18.

⁵ Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, p. 312.

⁶ L. Richard, *What are They Saying About the Theology of Suffering*, New York NY: Paulist Press, 1992, p. 1.

⁷ Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, pp. 314-315.

as earthquakes. . . . 4. Suffering from physical sicknesses and infirmities. . . . 5. Suffering from economic distress. . . . 6. Suffering from one's own fellow men. . . . 7. Suffering from religious and secular authorities. . . . 8. Suffering through the home life. . . . 9. Suffering from the fact of being associated with Christ.”⁸

All these started, in the beginning, with the fall of man (Gen 3). From this, suffering entered human experience. Some of the effects are seen in unjust social systems, in which the greed of the rich deprives the poor, and poor policy formulation, resulting in tragic famines.⁹ Then “there is the unmerited suffering, the suffering of the innocent . . . there is suffering, which is not even suffering for a good cause”.¹⁰ In addition, there is the suffering of death.

Yet, there are no positive answers to the reasons for sufferings. There is a lot about suffering, which humans cannot understand. What is left in people's minds are questions of “Why?” In all these, responses from those affected vary from positive to negative. Some blame God, while others accept their situation in humility, courage, and faith.¹¹ How is it, with those whom God has called out for His purposes? Are they excluded, or exempted?

Christians and missionaries are not exempted from sufferings, nor are sufferings restricted from the perimeters of mission. Suffering and mission go hand in hand. Where there is mission, there is suffering. All those, whom God calls out for His mission, are vulnerable to all forms of sufferings that exist in this world. Amid suffering and mission is the element of God's love, which is the driving factor. God's love for the world to be reconciled to Him climaxes on the cross of Jesus.

⁸ S. Jones, *Christ and Human Suffering*, London UK: Hodder & Stoughton, 1933, pp. 23-40.

⁹ D. Burnett, *The Healing of the Nations*, p. 92.

¹⁰ Richard, *What are They Saying About the Theology of Suffering*, p. 30.

¹¹ D. Hewetson, *Why Does a Good God Allow Suffering?*, Sutherland NSW: Albatross Books, 1992, p. 13.

As God initiates His redemption plan throughout history, it all points to bringing glory to Himself.¹² More than this, “it also declares that He is sovereign over all things (Ps 103:19). . . . His work of creation, with all the apparent risks involved, was the work of His sovereignty.”¹³ Despite the suffering that is involved in His redemption plan, He is able to bring glory for Himself out of this situation.

Suffering in mission, for those whom God has called out, reflects the power and glory of God, as a testimony to others (2 Cor 12:9). “The sufferings God’s people endure in this world are for the sake of the Kingdom of God” (2 Thess 1:5).¹⁴ Those of God’s servants who suffer, experience spiritual growth, providing they offer it to God, who can bring them to new depths of faith and service. According to Richard, “Suffering is a complex reality, as it is perceived in the history of humanity [however] is not always a negative reality. [It] can contribute to the maturity of an individual.”¹⁵ Ladd adds, “sufferings must be expected and endured; but those who patiently endure will be counted worthy of the gracious gift of the eschatological salvation. This suffering is not mere passive submission; it includes labouring for the Kingdom of God (Col. 4:11).”¹⁶

Four principles are seen in the theme of suffering in mission. (1) God is sovereign, and He is glorified over all the earth. (2) He is with those of His people who suffer, and shares in their suffering, and feels with them.¹⁷ (3) Suffering brings about spiritual growth and maturity. (4)

¹² S. Hawthorne, “The Story of His Glory”, in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement A Reader*, revd edn, R. D. Winter, and S. C. Hawthorne, eds, Pasadena CA: William Carey Library, 1992, p. A-34.

¹³ S. Ellisen, “Everyone’s Question: What is God Trying to Do?”, in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement A Reader*, revd edn, R. D. Winter, and S. C. Hawthorne, eds, Pasadena CA: William Carey Library, 1992, p. A-19.

¹⁴ G. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, revd edn, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1993, p. 450.

¹⁵ Richard, *What are They saying about the Theology of Suffering*, p. 30.

¹⁶ Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, pp. 450, 451. Note: “Labouring of the kingdom” here refers to devoted ministry in the service of the coming kingdom, by proclaiming it, and helping others to enter into it.

¹⁷ A. McGrath, *Suffering*, London UK: Hodder & Stoughton, 1992, pp. 21-22.

With suffering comes hope for His servants at the end. This principle of suffering in mission is seen, through the Old Testament history to the New Testament, as God unveils His ultimate purpose for the world to be reconciled to Him.

SUFFERING IN MISSION IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

The Old Testament is where the story of redemption begins, and it climaxes in the New Testament. The idea of God's mission begins in the Old Testament, starting with God Himself, and the concept of suffering in mission is part of that story. God calls out Abraham in Gen 12:1-3 to be a blessing to the world.

ABRAHAM'S EXPERIENCES

Abraham's world was filled with corruption, and yet God chose him out of an idolatrous people, for His purpose and glory. Despite being called, Abraham experienced some form of suffering in mission: the suffering of leaving his ancestral homeland in Ur (Gen 12:1), the suffering of his wife's barrenness (Gen 11:30). "His long sojourn from his ancestral homeland in Ur didn't exactly result in a brilliant missionary career . . . instead he . . . got thrown out of Egypt in disgrace",¹⁸ where, in fear of death, he denied his wife.¹⁹

One great experience, worth noting, is in the sacrifice of his son Isaac. How was God going to be glorified and acknowledged? The answer lies in His act of grace in Gen 12:1-3, which He repeats five times, to bless Abraham, his seed, and all the families of the earth. Despite Abraham's sufferings, more particularly his wife's barrenness, God made what was impossible to man possible with Him. Sarah gave birth to Isaac.

The second principle was that God was with him in his sufferings. The promise of the covenant is guaranteed by God's presence with Abraham, "Whoever curses you I will curse". In Abraham's sufferings, God was

¹⁸ S. Hawthorne, "The Story of His Glory", in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement A Reader*, revd edn, R. D. Winter, and S. C. Hawthorne, eds, Pasadena CA: William Carey Library, 1992, p. A-36.

¹⁹ See Gen 12:10-20.

with him, and saw him through. This is evident when Sarah was taken into Pharaoh's palace. The Lord inflicted serious diseases on Pharaoh and his household.²⁰

The third principle is, through suffering, there is growth and maturity. God's intention to test Abraham, in the sacrifice of Isaac, was to test his obedience, in the light of the covenant (Gen 12:1-3). In the execution of the test, Abraham was found to be genuine in his obedience to God (Gen 22:12).²¹ In his sufferings, Abraham matured, and his faith became full-grown.²² On the other hand, his son Isaac was seen to be submissive, even to the point of being laid on the altar of sacrifice.

Finally, the fourth principle here is that there is hope in suffering. Isaac's character, in the process of the sacrifice, has some similarities to the suffering Christ. Tidball explains the following features. Isaac is an only son, which Abraham loved so much (Gen 22:2), which has a parallel in Jesus' baptism, and the Mt of Transfiguration scene, where God spoke, "This is my Son, whom I love." Isaac carried the wood for his sacrifice (Gen 22:6), just as Christ carried His cross to the hill of Golgotha. Isaac's submission, all the way (Gen 22:9), is similar to Christ's obedience unto death. The rescue of Isaac, and his return home, correlates with Christ's resurrection and return to His throne in glory. The sacrifice of Isaac gives a glimpse of Calvary, which would be fulfilled later in Christ.²³

MOSES' EXPERIENCE

Moses is another great example of the divine-sending of an emissary on a mission to do the will of God. Moses, in his call and service to God, encountered suffering as well. Despite God's presence with him, suffering was a reality, with which Moses had to come to grips. Although there are many sufferings we could list, several notable ones,

²⁰ Gen 12:15-17.

²¹ D. Tidball, *The Message of the Cross*, Leicester UK: IVP, 2001, pp. 37, 39.

²² See Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, p. 316.

²³ Tidball, *The Message of the Cross*, pp. 43-49.

for this purpose, are seen in Moses' encounter with his own people, to whom he ministered and led.

There was a suffering he experienced in being misunderstood, at the hands of the Israelite foreman, when he was trying to help (Ex 5:21). The people protested, and accused him, when Pharaoh and his army pursued them (Ex 14:11). They grumbled and quarrelled with Moses, because there was no water, and almost stoned him (Ex 15:24; 17:1-7). They worshipped an idol, in the shape of a calf (Ex 32:19). Although the Israelites had witnessed great miracles, they were blind to all God's blessings.

Through this, four basic principles are seen, in light of Moses' suffering. Firstly, God is glorified. In Moses' encounter with the Egyptian magicians, they acknowledged God's greatness. They said to Pharaoh, "This is the finger of God" (Ex 8:19). Even to an extent, Pharaoh confessed his sin, "I have sinned against the LORD your God, and against you" (Ex 10:17). The entire Egyptian nation acknowledged the God of Israel.²⁴ According to Kaiser, "the events of Exodus . . . are not simply to eradicate the Egyptians, or their king, but so that 'the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord' (Ex 7:5, 17; 8:22; 14:4, 18)".²⁵

The second principle seen is that God was present with Moses amid his sufferings. Moses was just a man, who complained to God in his sufferings. "O LORD, why have you brought trouble upon this people? Ever since I went to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has brought trouble upon this people, and you have not rescued Your people at all" (Ex 5:22-23). This is a question that those in great distress ask, the question of why? The only way to answer this is to remain open to the possibility that, behind the mystery, there is a wise and loving Father, who is in control.²⁶ The evidence of God's presence with Moses is seen in their daily communication.

²⁴ See Ex 12:31-36.

²⁵ Kaiser Jr, *Mission in the Old Testament*, p. 21.

²⁶ Hewetson, *Why Does a Good God Allow Suffering?*, p. 19.

The third principle is where Moses, in his suffering, experiences growth and maturity. He begins to understand, and realise, the ultimate purpose of God. Kaiser says that Moses wanted Pharaoh and the people of Egypt to understand and know, through the plagues, that all the earth is the Lords' (Ex 9:29).²⁷ Not only does he understand the purposes of God, but he carries the burden of his people, and he is willing to suffer for them, even to the extent of being blotted out of the book of life, or to suffer forever, for the sake of his people (Ex 32:32). Similarly, Moses' desire to be taught God's way, so that he may find favour, is a great evidence of his growth and maturity (Ex 33:13).

Finally, although Moses was not allowed to enter the Promised Land, God gave him a glimpse of hope in his suffering. "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest" (Ex 33:14). Moses was shown the glory of God, and a place where there is no more suffering. Moses, at the end of his life, was resting, assured of his place with His Father.

THE PROPHET JEREMIAH'S EXPERIENCE

According to Carson, among God's people, it is the leadership that suffers most.²⁸ This pattern had already been set in the Old Testament, where most of the prophets faced opposition, and many lost their lives.

Jeremiah, like other prophets, had to come to grips with his call. He wrestled with the cost of being a prophet, as it demanded his life. He endured tremendous suffering, in the form of inner turmoil and outward affliction, which characterised his ministry. He was terrified of the opposition (Jer 20:10).²⁹ People did not believe his messages, and he was mocked by all levels of society. He was charged for disturbing the peace, beaten, and locked up. More than these, he was also charged with treason for prophesying God's coming judgment (Jer 20; 37:2).³⁰ Then, there was the suffering of being denied the privileges of private life, like not being allowed to marry, mourn, or participate in social gatherings.

²⁷ Kaiser Jr, *Mission in the Old Testament*, pp. 21-22.

²⁸ D. Carson, *How Long, O Lord?*, Grand Rapids MI: Baker Book House, 1992, p. 87.

²⁹ J. Goldingay, *God's Prophet, God's Servant*, (Exeter UK: Paternoster Press, 1984, pp. 17, 26-27.

³⁰ Carson, *How Long, O Lord?*, pp. 87-88.

How is the first principle, God's glory and name, portrayed in the suffering of Jeremiah? The judgment of Israel was due to her disobedience to God (Jer 11:9-13). God uses Babylonia to execute judgment. This is God's sovereignty manifested. The Nebuzaradan commander acknowledged the sovereign God, when he released Jeremiah, saying, "The LORD your God decreed this disaster. . . . And now the LORD has brought it about . . . because you people sinned against the LORD, and did not obey him" (Jer 40:2-3).

The second principle, here, is that God was present and involved with Jeremiah in his suffering. The suffering, experienced by Jeremiah, is attributed to God Himself. Jeremiah's suffering is not to do with his identification with Israel, but his identification with God. Since he comes to his people as the representative of God, what is done to him by men reflects their attitude to God. Hence, it is God who suffers, the one who is pushed out of His world onto the cross as the crucified one (Jer 1:5, 8-10).³¹

Amid the sufferings, there is a positive implication involved. The third principle is seen at work here. Jeremiah, in his suffering, is being moulded into the kind of person God wanted. He has matured and grown in the process. According to Goldingay, "He had already walked through the fires, and come out the other side, who now, through it all, stands confident, firm, unwavering, and resolute. Inner doubt is resolved, and strength of faith is triumphant."³² His growth and maturity also enables him to identify with his people. Although known as a prophet of doom, whose message was terror, he prays for them, on their behalf, and encourages them to pray.³³ He has understood God's way, and that is, being a servant, he has lost all his rights.³⁴

Finally, in the fourth principle, there is hope in suffering. Despite Jeremiah's message of judgment, the Lord had showed him hope, amid all these sufferings. " 'The days are coming', declares the LORD, 'when I

³¹ Goldingay, *God's Prophet, God's Servant*, pp. 41-42.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 16.

³³ See Jer 14:7, 9, 19, 22.

³⁴ Goldingay, *God's Prophet, God's Servant*, p. 23.

will bring my people Israel and Judah back from captivity, and restore them', . . . says the LORD" (Jer 30:3). "In the similar context, Jeremiah speaks of the renewing of the broken covenant between Yahweh and Israel, of its renewing, on a better and more permanent basis than before" (Jer 31:31-34; 32:36-41).³⁵ Kaiser says, "the nations will gather to Jerusalem to worship the LORD" (Jer 3:17).³⁶ For Jeremiah, personally, he finds freedom at the hands of his captors (Jer 40), after the fall of Jerusalem (Jer 39).

SUFFERING IN MISSION IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Having seen some examples in the Old Testament, relating to suffering in mission, in the context of missions, with the four principles as guides, we turn to the climax in the New Testament, more particularly in Christ Jesus, and also in His apostle Paul. In the New Testament, the cross of Christ is the focal point of Christian understanding and suffering. Jesus left His throne in glory to accomplish the mission of God, and encountered suffering.

JESUS' EXPERIENCE OF SUFFERING

Jesus' encounter with suffering began before His birth, and continued afterwards. His suffering was already heralded throughout the Old Testament, even after the immediate fall of Adam and Eve. "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will struck his heel" (Gen 3:15). Furthermore, His suffering was foreshadowed in the experiences of the Old Testament characters, as seen in the few examples cited earlier. Even when He was being conceived, He encountered the suffering of being rejected by his earthly father Joseph (Matt 1:18, 19). Then, there was the rejection of a proper place for His birth.³⁷

His birth brought about the threat of suffering death at the hands of Herod. Moreover, He suffered opposition and death at the hands of His very people, the religious leaders, and the rulers. He was tempted and

³⁵ Ibid., p. 73.

³⁶ Kaiser, *Mission in the Old Testament*, p. 73.

³⁷ See Luke 2:7.

tested (Matt 4:1-11),³⁸ and rejected by his home town (Luke 4:14-30). Moreover, He was betrayed (Mark 14:10, 11),³⁹ denied (John 18:16-18, 25-27),⁴⁰ and deserted (Matt 26:55),⁴¹ by His very own disciples.⁴² Finally, the climax of all suffering was His death on the cross for the redemption of the people of the world.

The first principle, where God is glorified, shows that it was God's will that Jesus come into the world to reconcile the world to His Father, through Himself. Jesus was obedient to death, thus bringing honour to His Father. Jesus confirmed this, when He spoke of His cross of suffering, on more than one occasion.⁴³ According to Tidball, "The cross was to reveal God's glory, and, concurrently, be the means, by which God would confer honour on His Son."⁴⁴ It was through Jesus that the Father was glorified.

The second principle is where God is present, and in the midst of suffering. The issue of whether God was present or not has been argued by scholars. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34). Tidball agrees with Moltmann that God abandoned Jesus in His death.⁴⁵ Ngien argues that "the sight of Jesus on the cross disclosed God as One who suffers within humanity . . . the human suffering of Jesus is really God's own suffering . . . the divinity was present in the cross, working out our salvation".⁴⁶ Whatever the arguments may be, the fact remains that God was grieved. He is a God, who feels for His people.

The third principle is where suffering brings about growth and maturity. The cross of Christ is the path to mature holiness. Jesus the Son of God learnt obedience through His suffering, and, therefore, was made perfect, enabling Him to become the source of salvation for all those who

³⁸ See also Luke 4:1-13.

³⁹ See also Matt 26:14-16; Luke 22:3-6.

⁴⁰ See also Matt 26:69-75; Mark 14:66-72; Luke 22:55-62.

⁴¹ See also Mark 14:50.

⁴² Tidball, *The Message of the Cross*, p. 145.

⁴³ See John 12:23, 27-28; 13:31-32; 17:1.

⁴⁴ Tidball, *The Message of the Cross*, p. 180.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

⁴⁶ D. Ngien, "The God who Suffers", in *Christianity Today*, 41-2 (1997), pp. 38-42.

believed. This does not mean that Christ was disobedient, so He had to learn to obey, but, rather, in His suffering His obedience was tested, thus resulting in it becoming fully-grown. So it is with us, that, through suffering, we are led to maturity, through our obedience for Christ (Heb 12:1-12).⁴⁷

Finally, the fourth principle shows there is hope in suffering. Christ, Himself, has become that hope, for all who believe in Him. Jesus, in His death, knew that the mission He came to do for His Father, was now completed. According to Stott, “Jesus clearly looked beyond His death to His resurrection, beyond His sufferings to His glory, and, indeed, was sustained in His trials by the ‘joy set before him’ ” (Heb 12:2).⁴⁸ Stott further adds, “The cross has made access to God available to all, irrespective of gender or race. The old private access road of Judaism has been closed. There is only one access route in the new age, and it goes through the cross. And, along that way, tread men and women, Jews and Gentiles, black and white, rich and poor, all on a level footing, carrying their own crosses, enjoying restored communion with God, and forming the new humanity.”⁴⁹

PAUL’S EXPERIENCE OF SUFFERING

Paul, unlike the Old Testament characters, is unique in his call and ministry. He seems to have accommodated the demands of his call, without much resistance.

For Paul, the first principle, where God is glorified in suffering, is seen in his boasting about the sufferings he endured, which is very uncommon. For Paul, it is only Christ that matters, and, if he may boast, it is only in the cross of Jesus (Gal 6:14). God’s purpose, in His choice of Paul, was to reveal His divine power, and to demonstrate the reality of the cross and resurrection of Jesus. Moreover, through the cross and resurrection of Christ, the wisdom and power of God, which was revealed earlier in

⁴⁷ Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, p. 316.

⁴⁸ Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, p. 322.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

Christ, is manifested in Paul's life, through his suffering (1 Cor 2:1-5; 2 Cor 2:14; 4:11).⁵⁰

The second principle, is where God is present, and in the midst of suffering. Paul no doubt knew that he was not alone in his suffering. "I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son, who loved me and gave Himself for me" (Gal 2:20). Paul knew that the old has been done away with, and now he had been raised to new life in Christ's power. Hence, Christ, in the person of the Holy Spirit, resided in him, and transformed him from inside.⁵¹

The third principle is suffering brings about growth and maturity. Hafemann states, "Paul's call was . . . linked to the fact that he would suffer greatly for the sake of (the Lord's) name. . . . Hence . . . Paul considered suffering to be a characteristic mark of his apostolic ministry."⁵² Paul grew deeper in the knowledge of God through Christ. According to Williams, "Paul valued suffering, above all, because it directed people to the grace of Christ (2 Cor 12:8-10)".⁵³ Carson adds that Paul, in his commitment to growth, declares, "I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (Phil 3:8). Paul further declares, "I want to know Christ, and the power of His resurrection" (Phil 3:10).⁵⁴

The fourth principle is there is hope in suffering. Paul, having embodied the cross and resurrection of Christ, understands the hope that is involved. He declares "I press on towards the goal to win the prize, for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus" (Phil 3:14). According to Hafemann, "Paul . . . encouraged his readers to be patient, and endure, in the midst of adversity, which is the outworking of their

⁵⁰ S. J. Hafemann, "Suffering", in *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters*, G. F. Hawthorne, R. P. Martin, and D. G. Reid, eds, Downers Grove IL: IVP, 1993, p. 919.

⁵¹ Tidball, *The Message of the Cross*, p. 236.

⁵² Hafemann, "Suffering", p. 919.

⁵³ I. Williams, *Prayer in Pain*, Nottingham UK: Grove Books, 1985, p. 15.

⁵⁴ Carson, *How Long, O Lord?*, p. 80.

faith (Rom 12:12; 2 Tim 4:5) . . . only those who suffer with Christ, in the endurance of faith, will also be glorified with Christ (Rom 8:17).⁵⁵

Finally, Paul encourages them that they will all experience the power of God, made known in the cross of Jesus, and the resurrection power of God, which will be transmitted, through the process of suffering, to sharing in Christ's glory (Rom 8:35; 2 Cor 4:14; 2 Thess 1:7).⁵⁶

LESSONS FOR THE MELANESIAN CHURCH

What then is there for the church in Melanesia to learn from the issue of suffering in mission, in the context of missions? As the church begins to slowly accept missions, for the purpose of God's mission, it is important that the church must accept the reality of suffering. The four principles, again, should help the church analyse the issue in application.

The first principle is, in suffering, God is glorified. As the church develops, and desires to send missionaries, or train coworkers for His mission, it is important that those who intend to go have died to self. As Paul testifies, "I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God" (Gal 2:20). Those who go know that they have died, hence what they do manifests Christ. In the process of suffering, they participate in the suffering of Christ, where the power and glory of God is seen as a testimony and witness. "The world must observe that we suffer, not because of public scandal or vice, but because we hold to the Word of God, preach it, and practise it."⁵⁷ As ambassadors of Christ, we must demonstrate the cross, to bring honour and glory to our Master.

The second principle is, in our suffering, God is with us. Although we may not find answers to suffering, in the midst of serving God, we must be encouraged that Christ, through the Holy Spirit, is with us. Christ promised that He will be with us, to the ends of the age (Matt 28:20). Hence, we must know that Jesus did not forsake us, but shares in our

⁵⁵ Hafemann, "Suffering", p. 920.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 920.

⁵⁷ Ngien, "The God who Suffers", p. 41.

pain, and cries with us in our agony. According to McGrath, “God decided to be hurt by our pain. God allowed Himself to suffer, and share in our grief. . . . The cross is the supreme demonstration of God’s solidarity with us in this world of suffering. He chose to enter this world . . . to share its sorrow and pain, and . . . finally, to suffer death on a cross.”⁵⁸

For this reason, we as “the church of the suffering God must exist, in and for this world, accepting suffering, itself, as it cares for the needy, the sick, and the poor, and seeks the liberation of the oppressed”.⁵⁹ This is done through our expression of God’s love to the world.

The third principle is there is growth and maturity in suffering. This becomes possible only when suffering is offered to God, believing that he can bring us to new depths of faith and service. We need to stay open to God, and allow Him to minister in our situation. Part of our growth and maturity involves the refinement of faith. Isaiah stated that suffering is like a refiner’s fire, which removes impurities from faith (Is 1:25; 48:10). Similarly, for us, suffering removes all the worldly things, on which we have built our foundations, which have taken God’s place. Hence, suffering enables us to discover our God again. We are not only refined, but also pruned, to remove obstacles that hinder our relationship to Christ (cf. John 15:1-11).⁶⁰

Further to this, suffering humbles us, and reminds us that we are helpless. We cannot do anything in this situation. Apart from being humbled, suffering provides the opportunity for witness to the world. Christ was a witness to many, even unto His death on the cross.⁶¹ According to Matthew, the centurion, and those who were guarding Him, after witnessing His death and all the events that happened, confessed that He was the Son of God (Matt 27:54).⁶² Paul, in chains, saw it as the opportunity to advance the gospel (Phil 1:12). In light of these, suffering

⁵⁸ McGrath, *Suffering*, pp. 21-22.

⁵⁹ Ngien, “The God who Suffers”, p. 41.

⁶⁰ McGrath, *Suffering*, pp. 80-89.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 88-87.

⁶² See also Mark 15:39, Luke 23:47.

does not prevent us from affirming our faith in Christ. Tertullian, in his writing, remarked that “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church”.⁶³

Finally, the fourth principle is there is hope in suffering. In the midst of our suffering, let us be encouraged that there is hope in Christ, through His resurrection. “For God chose us in Christ, before the creation of the world, to be holy and blameless in His sight” (Eph 1:4), “and present us before His glorious presence without fault and with great joy” (Jude 24). This should be our motivation and hope, compared to our current sufferings, which are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us (Rom 8:18). More to these, “our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. All tears will be wiped. There will be no more death, or mourning, or crying, or pain” (Rev 21:4).⁶⁴

CONCLUSION

Suffering in mission, in the context of missions, is a reality for the church of God. For Christian coworkers, and missionaries alike, the way of the cross is the only option for them. Yet “the place of suffering in service, and of passion in mission is hardly taught today”.⁶⁵ Any message preached on victory, (power, prosperity, and health) without the element of suffering, or eliminates suffering, denies the suffering servant, and the power of the resurrection. The death of Christ, therefore, becomes unreal, and, in a sense, implies that Christ never died. Such messages can be known as a prosperity gospel. According to Ngien, “if God is found in the human suffering of Jesus, we should not then preach a triumphalist doctrine of health, wealth, and freedom from affliction, for those who believe”.⁶⁶

⁶³ Cited in McGrath, *Suffering*, p. 89. Note: Tertullian was a 3rd-century North African theologian.

⁶⁴ Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, p. 323.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 322.

⁶⁶ Ngien, “The God who Suffers”, p. 41.

Stott clearly states that the “greatest single secret of evangelistic or missionary effectiveness is the willingness to suffer and die . . . the servant must suffer, if he is to bring light to the nations, and a seed must die, if it is to multiply”.⁶⁷ “Jesus remained a single grain, while He was doing limited ministry in one nation, Israel, but, after suffering, Jesus produced much fruit, whereby He expanded His ministry to all nations.”⁶⁸ “The Great Commission is given to His disciples, only after His suffering and death on the cross.”⁶⁹ It is suffering that must come first, before glory, for effective results to be achieved.

Jesus confirms suffering as a way for those who want serve Him. He taught His disciples that He was going to suffer and be killed, and, after three days, He would rise back to life again (Matt 16:21-28; Mark 8:31-32; Luke 9:22-29).⁷⁰ Jesus was also honest, by admitting that those who would follow Him will also suffer. He told His disciples the way of mission. “No servant is greater than his master. If they persecute Me, they will persecute you also.”⁷¹ Jesus, confirms the reality of suffering in mission. He accomplished His Father’s redemptive mission, through His suffering. Suffering, therefore, must be seriously accepted, and seen in light of the cross.

More to this, Christ has set for us a model. Van Engen says, “Jesus is the model, as 1 Pet 2:21 clearly indicates: “For you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in His steps.”⁷² Apart from setting the example, Christ has also assured us that He will be with us to the end of the age, through the Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit of mission. Therefore, with this, we must not be robbed, by prosperity gospel, which eliminates the power and the glory of Christ Jesus, our Lord, of the great privilege of knowing the cross of Jesus, as the way for mission.

⁶⁷ Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, p. 322.

⁶⁸ C. Van Engen, *Footprints of God*, Monrovia CA: MARC, 1999, p. 94.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

⁷⁰ Van Engen, *Footprints of God*, p. 95.

⁷¹ John 15:20.

⁷² Van Engen, *Footprints of God*, p. 98.

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