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HOW CAN I LOVE A SOVEREIGN GOD WHEN TRAGEDY STRIKES?
AN ARTICLE SUBMITTED TO TESTAMENTUM IMPERIUM

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Introduction

How can I love a sovereign God when tragedy strikes? *How* and *where* one begins to answer the question will determine the response. Theodicies are often grouped into two main towers of tragedy: moral evil and “natural” evil. For example, Job lost his oxen and donkeys because the Sabeans attacked and took them (Job 1:14, 15).¹ It was immoral for them to do so. However, Job’s sons and daughters died because a “great wind came across the wilderness and struck the four corners of the house” in which they were eating and drinking and it fell upon them (Job 1:19). Some would say their deaths were due to a “natural” evil, a wind or tornadic event. However, the biblical worldview reveals God ruling and directing his created order (Ps. 104:14; 135:6, 7; 147:4; 148:8, Job 38:12, 22-30, 32; Is. 40:26; Matt. 5:45). His sovereignty reigns over and through tragedies as well.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Biblical references in this paper are from the *New American Standard Bible* updated (Anaheim, CA: Foundation Publications, 1995). Used by permission.

The crucifixion of the Son of God is the greatest tragedy in the history of humanity, infinitely outweighing all of the collected heartaches, losses, calamities, catastrophes, disasters, and injuries ever to befall our world. But the event of the murder of the Messiah also gives meaning to other tragedies, particularly to those who are called by God (Rom. 8:28).

I intend to justify why we should start with the crucifixion from an historical perspective based on Martin Luther's *Theologia Crucis*. Then I will consider the historical context of crucifixion in order to help us obtain a shared cultural meaning of crucifixion in light of our question. Next, I will show the apostle Paul's perspective, who may be termed a walking tragedy, and how he responded to calamities while being faithful in ministry to God by examining 2 Corinthians 4:7-12 and 2 Corinthians 12:7-12 as examples. It is my hope and prayer that the reader will be built up in faith, prepared for when tragedy strikes, to the glory of God, and that in brokenness he or she might minister to others in their own calamities.

Tragedy as the Genesis of Doing Theology

The question "How can I love a sovereign God when tragedy strikes?" could be considered a manifestation of the methodology of whom Martin Luther described as a theologian of glory. The starting point for all theological endeavors solely rests in the cross of Christ, the crucified God, for Luther. Because revelation has all authority over speculation, any so-called "theologian" is invalidated as such, especially when theology is based upon merely the created order. Only in observing God in suffering and the cross do we truly find God.

This theorem pierced through the heart of scholasticism's theological methodology, exemplified best in Thomas Aquinas, which overshadowed much of the common theological assumptions in Luther's day. In contrast to the "theology of glory" so prevalent in his time, Luther saw the cross not merely as the basis of human salvation, but as the basis of God's self-revelation in which true theology and the knowledge of God alone could be found.²

The Import of Luther's *Theologia Crucis*

Most historians consider the years 1517 and 1519 as being of most importance in the life of Martin Luther and the Reformation as a whole. Luther posted his 95 Theses on Indulgences at Wittenberg in the former year, and then disputed with Johannes Eck in Leipzig during the latter. During the intervening year of 1518, a new phrase was added to the vocabulary of Christendom – the "theology of the cross" in which we find Luther's developing theological insights crystallized into one of the most powerful and radical understandings of the nature of Christian theology which the church has ever known.³

The phrase "theology of the cross" has its origin in the Heidelberg Disputation of 1518. Heinrich Bornkamm argues that, as far as the theology of the Reformation is concerned, the Heidelberg Disputation is the most influential of all Luther's disputations because it is theologically much more important and influential, even though the Ninety-

² J.B. Green, "Theology of the Cross," *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid, eds. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 192.

³ Alister E. McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (Oxford: Blackwood Publishers Ltd, 1990), 1.

five Theses caused more of an ecclesiastical and political stir.⁴ Present at the disputation were no less than six future reformers, such as Martin Bucer and Johannes Brenz, who became Luther's disciples or were greatly influenced by him.⁵

On April 26, 1518, Martin Luther presided over the opening disputation of the chapter of the Augustinian Order at Heidelberg, and drew up a series of theses for the occasion at the request of Johannes von Staupitz.⁶ The twenty-eight theses can be divided into four sections: (1) Theses 1-12 consider the nature and worth of human works over against the question of sin; (2) Theses 13-18 deal with the impotence of human free will to avoid sin; (3) Theses 19-24 pertain to the fundamental contrast between approaching these questions as a theologian of glory or a theologian of the cross; (4) Theses 25-28 declare the climactic outcome of the whole movement: God's love in Christ is a creative act that brings believers into being.⁷

According to Alister McGrath, the Oxford lecturer at Wycliffe Hall, the most significant statements relating to Luther's *theologia crucis* are found in Theses 19 and 20.⁸ However, we will include Theses 21 as well, for it explicitly states a key feature of his thought and, by including it, follows Luther's rationale more completely:

19. That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who claims to see into the invisible things of God by seeing through earthly things (events, works).

20. But that person deserves to be called a theologian who comprehends what is visible of God through suffering and the cross.

21. The theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. The theologian of the cross says what a thing is.

Notice the emphasis is upon the two-fold operation of a true theologian and not on theology as such. An authentic theologian sees and speaks based upon the crucifixion of the Son of God, the "alien work" as Luther described it.

One can miss Luther's point easily by not seeing the theses in their context. Prior to theses 19 and 20, Luther exposes a fault in man's estimation of works (part 1) based on a false estimate of the power of the will (part 2), which in turn presumes a knowledge of God's judgment on such works (part 3).⁹ Notice also that there is no discussion about theology proper, but in the purported theologians themselves, and how they respond to the crisis created in the previous theses. At stake is not merely a theology, whether it should be of the cross or something else. Rather, what is at stake is the very survival and viability of the *theologian*.¹⁰

⁴ Gerhard O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 19.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁶ McGrath, 148.

⁷ Forde, 21-22.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Forde, 70.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

This truth is what Luther was meaning in his famous striking statement concerning the qualifications of a true theologian, “Living, or rather dying and being damned make a theologian, not understanding, reading or speculating.”¹¹ The *theologia crucis* has to do with what Luther referred to often as the question of *usus*, the way the cross is put to use in our lives. Hence, one cannot truly even write “a” theology of the cross, or “the” theology of the cross, for Luther himself did not. Rather, he gives an account of what those who have been smitten and raised up through the event of the cross *do*.¹²

Essential Features of Luther’s *Theologia Crucis*

Though a thorough investigation of Luther’s *theologia crucis* is beyond the scope of this article, the key components may be summarized in five essential features:¹³

(1) The *theologia crucis* is a theology of revelation, which stands in sharp contrast to speculation. This method of theology qualifies one to be a true theologian. Any other method, especially one based upon speculation on the created order, disbars one from being called a “theologian”. For Luther, the theologian’s task is to concentrate on how God has revealed himself in light of the crucifixion of Christ. Essentially, Luther discovered what the apostle Paul revealed: the cross is the interpretative framework for making sense of God.

(2) This revelation must be considered as indirect and obscured. In examining the work of God in the crucifixion of his Son, the language of paradox soon arises, as is evident here. How can revelation be concealed or obscured? This idea is one of the most difficult aspects of Luther’s *theologia crucis* to comprehend. However, Luther’s allusion to Moses’ experience (Exodus 33:23) in Thesis 20 assists us in understanding the apparent irony.

Moses petitioned God to see his glory, desiring a direct encounter with him, and Yahweh condescends to Moses. “It will come about, while My glory is passing by, that I will put you in the cleft of the rock and cover you with My hand until I have passed by. Then I will take My hand away and you shall see My back, but My face shall not be seen.” (Ex. 33:23-24). This “backside” of God, or *posteriora Dei* as Luther used, is the revelation of God Almighty on a cross. Since no man can see God’s face and live, Yahweh revealed his rearward parts to Moses. Those seeking the face of God will miss his revelation of himself in the crucifixion, the “backside” of God. However, those with eyes of faith will see this hidden revelation of God crucified, acknowledging God’s power, wisdom, and glory.

(3) This revelation is to be recognized in the sufferings and the cross of Christ, rather than in human moral activity or the created order. McGrath sees in Luther’s emphasis that the activities of both the moralist and the rationalist, who expect to find God through intelligent reflection upon the nature of man’s moral sense or the pattern of the created order, are shattered at the revelation of Christ crucified.¹⁴ The word of the

¹¹ McGrath, 152.

¹² Forde, xii.

¹³ McGrath, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, 149.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 150.

cross nullifies man's capacity to find God through morality and reason alone since by

them they will not lead fallen man to the foot of the cross.

(4) This knowledge of God who is hidden in his revelation is a matter of faith. In his theological paradigm centered on the cross, Luther sees Philip as an example of a "theologian of glory" in that he characterizes the tendency to pursue God without Christ.

"Philip said to Him, 'Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us'" (John 14:8). However, in response to Philip, Jesus declares, "He who has seen Me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). For Luther, the "theologian of the cross" is one who, through faith, discerns the hidden presence of God as revealed in Christ crucified.

(5) God is principally known through suffering. McGrath cites Luther's fundamental contention of his *theologia crucis* is not merely that God is known *through* suffering (whether that of Christ or of the individual), but that God *makes himself known* through suffering.¹⁵ For Luther, God is not passive but active because suffering and temptation are seen as the means by which man is brought to God. McGrath explains Luther's contention, "Far from regarding suffering or evil as a nonsensical intrusion into the world (which Luther regards as the opinion of a "theologian of glory"), the "theologian of the cross" regards such suffering as his most precious treasure, for revealed and yet hidden in precisely such sufferings is none other than the living God, working out the salvation of those whom he loves."¹⁶

We have seen how one approaches doing theology is critical to determining where one will end up in seeking to answer our question, "How can I love a sovereign God when tragedy strikes?" Luther has served us well in driving us from the emptiness and impotence of human morality and reason alone to the cross of Jesus and suffering as God's ultimate self-revelation to us.

We can love God when tragedy strikes because God used the ultimate tragedy, the crucifixion of his Son, to bring salvation to his people. All other tragedies should be seen through this final revelation of God. If God brought hope and redemption through the tragedy of the cross, then he will do the same through our personal tragedies as well.

This understanding leads us to consider the cross of Jesus in its historical context in order to gain a more mutually shared cultural meaning of crucifixion. In turn, we will better understand how God works through calamities, suffering, and loss.

¹⁵ Ibid., 151.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Tragedy as Jesus' exceptional construct for praxis

First-Century Crucifixion

The Son of God was saying to them all, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me" (Luke 9:23). In these sobering words, we find that to take up one's cross is not an option to those who claim to be Christ's followers; it is an imperative. It is also important to note that in all three Synoptic Gospels these words follow the account of Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi. At Caesarea, Jesus first warns about his looming passion. It is the place where Peter rejects the cross as the path for Jesus. This refusal from Peter led to a painful rebuke by the Lord Jesus where he cites the ultimate source of Peter's stance: Satan. The words of Jesus come as a response to a leading disciple who initially rejected the idea of Messiah dying on a cross.

The Synoptics record Christ's imperative to bear the cross. This cross-bearing occurs five times in different contexts (Mark 8:34; Matt. 10:38; 16:24; Luke 9:23; Luke 14:27).¹⁷ Though different explanations have been offered with regard to Jesus' words, the most probable is the Roman custom requiring a condemned man to carry a part of his own cross, (the crossbeam or *patibulum*), to the place of execution.¹⁸ However, among the Synoptics, Luke ties in the passion more closely to Peter's confession of faith. Immediately after Peter stated that Jesus is "the Christ of God," Luke tells us that Jesus "warned them and instructed them not to tell this to anyone, saying, 'The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed and be raised up on the third day'" (Luke 9:21,22). The word "saying" links the prediction of the passion, which follows very closely with what precedes.¹⁹ The idiom of "denying oneself" (*avrnhsa, sqw e`auto.n*), is also found in the dominical calls to discipleship, with the same voice-pronoun combination (cf. Matt. 16:24; Mark 8:34; 2 Timothy 2:13).²⁰ Matthew

¹⁷ D.G. Burke, "Cross," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), 827.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Leon Morris, *The Cross in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1965), 76.

²⁰ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar: Beyond the Basic* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1996), 419.

records the words of Christ in the negative, “And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me” (Matt. 10:38). Surely, those who first heard these words were aghast at the peremptory call of Christ.

Towards a Shared Cultural Meaning of Crucifixion

Before one can fully grasp these astonishing words of the Son of God, there must be a proper knowledge of the culture in which he was speaking. One must share the same cultural meaning as did Jesus’ audience when he first spoke the words. Unfortunately, some portions of popular preaching have baptized the words of the Lord Jesus Christ, with the purpose of trying to appeal it to the modern mind, without conveying their meaning as the original audience would understand them.

In so doing, whether intentionally or unintentionally, the foundational message of what it means to be a Christian, taking up one’s cross, has been diminished and cheapened in the church. The manifested results are apparent in the superficial spirituality of American Christianity. Martin Hengel observes, “Reflection on the harsh reality of crucifixion in antiquity may help us to overcome the acute loss of reality which is to be found so often in present theology and preaching.”²¹

An Obscene Word Rarely Spoken

First-century literature does not contain many references to crucifixion, especially

among the Romans. However, Cicero, a Roman orator states, “The very word, cross, should be far removed—not only from the person of a Roman citizen but from his thoughts, his eyes and his ears. For it is not only the actual occurrence of these things or the endurance of them, but liability to them. The expectation, indeed, the very mention of them that is unworthy of a Roman citizen and a free man.”²²

²¹ Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 90.

²² F. Alan Tomlinson, “The Passion of the Christ” Seminar, Kansas City, MO, Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2 April 2004, CD no. 20040402C.

This call for the cross to be removed from Roman lips is because, as Hengel submits, “The cross was not just a matter of indifference, just any kind of death; it was an utterly offensive affair, ‘obscene’ in the original sense of the word.²³ Therefore, the word “cross” was rarely used in the common vernacular. In fact, to use the term “cross” in the first-century was comparable to the most vile curse word used in the twenty-first century.²⁴ The word is scarcely used in the cultured literary world of the Romans because of its awful social connotations, being rarely found in literary texts, tombs, or inscriptions, from the first century.²⁵

Because of the grotesque nature of crucifixion, there are very few detailed descriptions of crucifixion in the first-century world. The gospels are the most detailed of all among primary sources and the main reason to account for this is that no ancient

writer wanted to dwell too long on this cruel procedure.²⁶ Psuedo-Manetho comments, “Punished with limbs outstretched, they see the stake as their fate; they are fastened and nailed to it in the most bitter torment, evil food for birds of prey and grim pickings for dogs” (Apostelesmatica 4:198).²⁷

Martin Hengel quotes Seneca’s testimony concerning the many different possibilities for inflicting pain granted to the executioner, “I see crosses there, not just of one kind but made in many different ways: some have their victims with head down to the ground; some impale their private parts; others stretch out their arms on the gibbet.²⁸

Tomlinson confirms that the Roman executioners had the right to do whatever served

their sadistic pleasure to the body of the condemned and they would crucify the victims

in various postures, such as sideways or upside down upon “X” crosses, “T” crosses, or “Y” crosses.²⁹

²³ Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 22.

²⁴ Tomlinson, “The Passion of the Christ” Seminar.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 25.

²⁷ Tomlinson, *Passion of the Christ Seminar*.

²⁸ Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 25.

²⁹ Tomlinson, *Passion of the Christ Seminar*.

Proxy Terms for the Cross and Crucifixion

The following phrases are common, vulgar vernacular of the first-century regarding crucifixion. They assist in gaining a better understanding of the culture's regard for the punishment. The cross was considered a "sign of shame" (Heb. 12:2); "the infamous stake" (Anth. Latina); "the barren wood" (Seneca); "the criminal wood" (Seneca); "the terrible" (Plautus); "the slave punishment"; "the servile wood;" and "the slave's wood."³⁰

Tomlinson submits that a common expression found among slaves, "May you be nailed to a cross!" is an exclamation that probably would result in your death. This phrase was popular among slaves at Pompeii and would be comparable to the most vulgar of words in the twentieth century.³¹ He also notes that there exists ample evidence that the word "cross" was used as a vulgar taunt among the lower classes. It is found on the lips of slaves and prostitutes and was a term of bitter contempt.³²

Ancient Samples of Social Contempt for the Cross

The public contempt for the message of the cross is found in the graffito etched on a stone in a guardroom on Palatine Hill near the Circus Maximus in Rome.³³ The depiction is of a man with the head of an ass hanging on a cross as another man nearby raises his hand in a gesture of worship. The inscription reads, "Alexamenos worships his god."³⁴ These words convey strongly how contemptible the idea of

³⁰ Tomlinson, *Passion of the Christ Seminar*. Dr. Tomlinson cites no less than twenty-one different phrases for the word "cross." He uses these as evidence of how the ancient world despised the very word "cross," preferring to use a different expression for the term such as: "slave's wood"; "servile wood"; "servile stick"; "slaves' instrument"; "slave's tree"; "slaves poker"; "slaves stick"; "the extreme penalty"; "the fatal wood"; "the most wretched of deaths"; "to make a T of someone"; "the evil instrument" (one of the most common); "the severe instrument"; "the terrible"; "the criminal wood"; "the barren wood"; "the infamous stake"; "the slave's punishment"; "sign of shame" (Heb. 12:2); "the worst of deaths"; "death bound by iron."

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 560.

³⁴ Ibid., 561.

a crucified Lord was to pagan thinking.³⁵ Similarly, the word “ass” is a regular term pagans used for Christians in the first-century.³⁶

Minucius Felix, a Christian living in the second century, quotes the statement of a Christian hater, “To say that their ceremonies (i.e. the Christians) center on a man put to death for his crime and on the fatal wood of the cross is to assign to these abandoned wretches sanctuaries which are appropriate to them and the kind of worship they deserve.”³⁷

A Punishment Proscribed for Slaves

Primarily, crucifixion was the punishment used for slaves, although it was also reserved for the most severe Roman criminals, such as insurrectionists and traitors. Knowing these truths is crucial to understand in light of Mark 10:45, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.” In the gospels, Jesus consistently defines his Messiahship with death and resurrection. Tomlinson offers the Roman historical background to the beginning of crucifixion being proscribed for slaves in the first century:

“In 71 B.C. the Romans crucified 6,000 slaves down the Appian way that stretches from Rome to Capua, which is close to Naples. This road stretches 110 miles long. Survivors said that as they were dying on the cross, the Romans killed their children and wives in front of them and the stench from the crucified ones could be smelled from 30 miles around that road. From this time onward, the cross became inherently connected with slavery.”³⁸

We have examined the historical context in order to gain a more mutually shared cultural meaning of crucifixion. In turn, we should ask ourselves why we should be treated any better than Jesus? Why should we expect no tragedies to occur in our lives, that no suffering will occur, or that we anticipate living without any losses while on this earth?

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Tomlinson, “The Passion of the Christ”.

³⁷ Ibid. The term “sanctuaries” is a reference to the cross.

³⁸ Ibid.

The church and its doctors must recover a more robust, fully orbbed hamartology in the context of answering our question. We deserve nothing more than God’s righteous judgment. At the same time, we must recover the right *usus* or use of the cross as a patter for praxis. This is what Jesus meant in his call to any potential follower, ““If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me” (Luke 9:23).

Tragedy and the Perspective of Paul

After having considered Martin Luther’s *Theologia Crucis* as the genesis for theological methodology, and having examined crucifixion in its first-century setting, we now turn to the apostle Paul. What was his perspective concerning the tragedies he faced? How did he respond? What enabled him to continue in faith and ministry despite enormous difficulties? Particular attention will be given to 2 Corinthians 4:7-12 which contains probably the most succinct statements of his life and ministry, as well as one of the most paradoxical and debated passages by Paul (2 Cor. 12:7-12).

Pericope: 2 Corinthians 4:7-12

Previously in 4:1-6, Paul states that because of the mercy he and his associates had received, they do not lose heart. Instead of being skilled in craftiness or adulterating the word of God, they commend themselves to every man’s conscience by manifesting the truth. Furthermore, he describes Satan’s use of the veil over those who remain unbelieving, blinded to the light of the gospel of Christ. However, just as God spoke light into existence at creation, so too, he has spoken light to shine in the apostle’s heart, and in the hearts of his co-workers in ministry. From this context, Paul continues to propound his insights into new-covenant ministry by using the imagery of pottery, a well-known object in first-century Corinth.

The words “earthen vessels” (v7) refer to baked clay or pottery. Keener describes this term as earthen or clay jars, which were readily discarded; because clay was readily available, such containers were cheap and disposable if they were broken or incurred ceremonial

impurity.³⁹ Paul essentially answers his critics who question his credentials as an apostle by claiming he is feeble cracked pottery in service to God. This answer would further irritate and annoy the proud hearts of the super-apostles at Corinth who were so skilled at being puffed up.

In addition, Corinthian pottery was well-known in the ancient world and Paul may have been referring to the small pottery lamps which were cheap and fragile or he may have referred to earthenware vases or urns.⁴⁰ The reference to these vessels being a small pottery lamp is interesting in that it seems to bring more coherence to his thought, especially in view of the preceding verse which spoke of light shining in their hearts. Whatever the specific usage of this baked clay one chooses, the emphasis lies upon the fragile nature of the containers, which Paul identifies as himself and his associates.

At the same time, however, the precious cargo he carries in the gospel of Christ crucified, is for a specific purpose: that the power will be God's, not Paul's. This power is superlative in its nature, and Paul uses the Greek word *u`perbolh,*, (*hyperbole*, v7) which means to be surpassing or outstanding in quality. Barrett translates the last phrase of the verse as, “that the preeminence of power may be God's, and not derived from us.”⁴¹

Paul provides a powerful principle in God's economy. Where there is humility, he manifests his power; where there is pride, man is left to himself. Savage notes those who enjoyed the most dramatic manifestations of God's power were often those of the greatest humility – men such as Abraham (“I am but dust and ashes” [Gen 18:27]), Moses (“Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh” [Ex 3:11]), Gideon (“My family is the least in Manasseh, and I am the youngest in my father's house” [Ex 3:11]), and David (“I am a poor man and lightly esteemed” [1 Sam 18:23]).⁴² For the purpose of amplifying his metaphor of an earthen vessel with precious treasure, he further describes what he means by listing his afflictions and the positive fruit they bare.

³⁹ Keener, 498.

⁴⁰ Rienecker, 463.

⁴¹ Martin, 85.

⁴² Savage, 167.

Because of the message of “Christ crucified,” peril constantly pursues the apostle. Most modern scholars consider verses eight and nine an affliction list, or what is known as a peristasis catalog. *Peristasis* is the Greek term for “circumstance” and can indicate either a pleasant or an unpleasant situation with the latter being more common.⁴³ Though Paul used peristasis catalogs in 1 and 2 Corinthians in a similar method as the philosophers of his day, to present himself as a person of integrity, he used them to demonstrate the power of God in his life.⁴⁴ His argument reproved the Corinthians’ haughtiness and distinguished himself from the super-apostles’ egotism for Paul is just the opposite of them. He does not rely upon an imposing personality, or the professional speaker’s methods of his day. Yet, he remains faithful in the midst of suffering, thereby proving his integrity as a person, and in his ministry.

Paul’s usage of afflictions reproved the Corinthians’ haughtiness and distinguished himself from the super-apostles’ egotism for Paul is just the opposite of them. He has neither an imposing personality, nor outstanding rhetorical skills. Yet, he remains faithful in the midst of suffering, thereby proving his integrity as a person, and in his ministry.

Verses eight and nine are exemplary of the use of a pun, technically called a paronomasia. Paronomasia is a play on words that have the same or similar sounds but different meanings.⁴⁵ Unfortunately, this play is not readily noticeable in English translations, however, we will use the last phrase of verse eight as an example by citing the transliteration in order to see the pun: *aporoumenoi all’ ouk exaporoumenoi* (“perplexed, but not despairing” 2 Cor. 4:8).⁴⁶ Certainly, the Corinthians would have caught these puns, though they probably struggled with Paul’s point, given their spiritual arrogance. But he leaves no linguistic room for them to do so. The two participles in each antithesis are joined by the particle *ouvk* (rather than the customary *mh.*) which indicates that Paul is emphatic about the interpretation of his suffering – “we are

⁴³ J.T. Fitzgerald, “Affliction Lists,” *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter, eds. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 16.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁴⁵ W. Randolph Tate, *Biblical Interpretation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), 15.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

afflicted in every way, but *by no means* crushed.”⁴⁷ When Paul is afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down the power of God pours in and through his life.

In verses ten and eleven, the apostle chooses very stark and graphic language in reference to Jesus: “...always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.” Savage argues that these verses could well be the nucleus of the apostle’s understanding of the Christian ministry.⁴⁸

The words “carrying about” (*perife,rw*, v10), has been suggested by Keener to be typically used for pallbearers, implying that Paul not only preaches but also carries around Jesus’ dying in the persecutions he faces daily.⁴⁹ He also notes the word “dying” (*ne,krwsij*, 2 Cor. 4:10) includes the stench and rotting of a person who was dead or dying.⁵⁰ Savage affirms that the phrase “the dying of Jesus” (*th.n ne,krwsin tou/ Vlhsoul*, v10), suggests Paul is thinking of the excruciating suffering of Jesus’ crucifixion.⁵¹

But in what way is Paul carrying the dying of Jesus? Perhaps Savage answers this most significant yet enigmatic statement in the clearest way. More importantly, he does so within the context and spirit of 2 Corinthians and Paul’s overall ministry. His answer includes four parts: (1) a sharing in and filling up a heritage of righteous suffering (cf. Col. 1:24); (2) a sharing in the weakness of the cross (cf. 2 Cor. 13); (3) a sharing in the demise of the present age (cf. 2 Cor. 13:4); and (4) a sharing in the paradox of new life (cf. 2 Cor. 5:15,17).⁵²

Though suffering is central to the thought of Paul in these verses, the apostle also emphasizes the manifested life of Jesus through Paul. He reveals the central axiom of new-covenant ministry: death leads to life. Yet the demonstration of life is evident not for the

⁴⁷ Savage, 171.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 172.

⁴⁹ Keener, 499.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Savage, 172.

⁵² Ibid., 173-178.

apostle alone. God reveals another reason for suffering in the next verse.

The opening “so” (*w/ste*, 2 Cor. 4:12) shows that verse twelve flows as a direct consequence from the message of verses ten and eleven.⁵³ Paul provides the purpose for his sufferings; they were for the Corinthian believers. But in what way? How did his sufferings benefit them? Savage argues what this means in practical terms is that Paul reveals that his suffering works for the Corinthians’ *salvation*.⁵⁴ This language is also evident in the beginning of the letter, “But if we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation” (2 Cor. 1:6). Surely, only the blood of Christ is efficacious for salvation (1 Pet. 1:18, 19). However, in some way, the faithfulness of the apostle somehow channels salvation to the Corinthians because he is God’s man chosen to mediate the gospel of Christ to them. At the same time, from an outward perspective, Paul’s ministry seems to be failing since death is consistently active in his life, yet he considers this difficult constant in his life as worth it because God’s people receive life from it.

Pericope: 2 Corinthians 12:7-12

A textual issue arises in the very beginning of this passage. The main concern involves whether the phrase “because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations” should end verse six, or begin verse seven. Most modern translations include it as the beginning of a new sentence, such as in verse seven of the NASB. However, if one includes the inferential conjunction *dio*, which normally begins a sentence, then the beginning of verse seven should be joined with verse six.⁵⁵ Therefore, the ending of verse six would include the following ending: “For if I do wish to boast I will not be foolish, for I will be speaking the truth; but I refrain from this, so that no one will credit me with more than he sees in me or hears from me, *especially because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations* (italics added).

Paul goes on to describe the consequences of these heavenly visions, which leads him to describe and define the paradoxical construct of new-covenant ministry (2 Cor. 12:7-10). Paul’s explicit

⁵³ Ibid., 178.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Martin, 389.

statements regarding the preeminence of the cross in his life and ministry, (especially in 1 Cor. 1:18; 23; 2:2), and his implicit insights into its meaning as we have seen previously (2 Cor. 2:14-17; 3:1-6; 3:4-6; 4:7-12, 4:16-18; 5:1-5), serve as good ground for interpreting one of the most puzzling passages in Pauline literature.

The apostle finds it necessary to engage in the activity he does not want to do. Because of the threat of his opponents at Corinth, he reluctantly uses boasting as a means of defending the integrity of his ministry. This reluctance is seen when he refers to himself in the third person (“I know a man,” 2 Cor. 12:2), and describes the visionary experience of being caught up to the third heaven. It must be remembered that Paul battles with opponents who were in some way super-pneumatics and that Paul himself had at least eight visions.⁵⁶

However, in this particular case, such experiences involved surpassingly great revelations which were forbidden for him to relate or describe. Instead of boasting, however, in things that others cannot see, indeed, special revelations of Paradise, he simply urges his audience to look at what they know of him by speech and example, that is, the self-evident examples of his tribulations (12:6).⁵⁷

Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations Paul was given a *sko,loy* (*skolops*, 2 Cor. 12:7) a word rarely used as “thorn.”⁵⁸ Paul recalls that it was given *th/ sarki*. The dative is either of advantage “for my flesh” or locative “in my flesh.”⁵⁹ Originally, *sko,loy* referred to anything pointed such as a pointed stake, and then something that causes serious annoyance such as a thorn or splinter.⁶⁰ If *sko,loy* is indeed referring to a stake, then Paul provides a graphic metaphor to his condition. In addition, the term is one of the more common words used to crucify someone; that is, the victim would be staked on a cross with iron pegs, as Tomlinson states, “This is what is

⁵⁶ Brad H. Young, “The Ascension Motif in 2 Corinthians 12 in Jewish, Christian and Gnostic Texts,” *Grace Theological Journal* 1, no. 9 (Spring 1988): 78. These visions include: his Damascus road experience (Acts 9:3-6; 26:12-18); his vision of Ananias (Acts 9:12); the appearance of the Macedonian man after which Paul responds by immediately trying to travel to Macedonia (Acts 16:9-10); the vision of encouragement in Corinth (Acts 18:9-10); his experience in the Temple (Acts 22:17-21); the night vision after his appearance before the council (Acts 27:23-24); and this experience of the third heaven (2 Cor. 12:1-10).

⁵⁷ Martin, 390.

⁵⁸ Tomlinson.

⁵⁹ Rienecker, 495.

⁶⁰ Bauer, s.v. “sko,loy .”

in Paul, an iron peg, and he is not getting it out because he has taken up the cross and follows his crucified Lord.”⁶¹ Celsus employs *sko,loy* with scorn in reference to the cross of Jesus and it is fallacious to convey that “the term can scarcely indicate that Paul is using it in that sense here, since he always says *stauro,j*.”⁶² However, such a stance fails to consider the concept as well the word, and does not allow the apostle his rightful prerogative to communicate the concept in another way.

If these revelations and the subsequent *sko,loy* were given to Paul around A.D. 44,⁶³ it would then explain the extremely personal identification of crucifixion he describes when writing to the Galatians, arguably the earliest letter of Paul. The apostle declares, “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me” (Gal. 2:20). In that letter, Paul rejects those who boast in self-vindicating flesh. In so doing he provides another insight into his personal identification with crucifixion. He states, “But may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Gal. 6:14). To the Philippians Paul writes, “That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead” (Phil. 3:10, 11). On this G.R. Beasley-Murray quoting Tannehill comments, “Through participation in Christ’s death and resurrection Christ himself is known, for it is in this way that Christ gives himself to the believer and exercises his Lordship over him.”⁶⁴

This interpretation of Paul’s use of the term *sko,loy* fits better with the historical use of the term in the New Testament period. It also corresponds to Paul’s *crucicentric* understanding of his apostolic calling. Likewise, it provides a graphic picture or paradigm Paul has

⁶¹ Tomlinson.

⁶² Bauer, s.v. “sko,loy .”

⁶³ Martin, 406.

⁶⁴ G.R. Beasley-Murray, “Dying and Rising with Christ,” *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid, eds. (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 221.

to the overall scheme of his life, to the various difficulties he endures as an apostolic missionary in the first century. In this sense, our interpretation would include the other possible conjectures, instead of attempting to rule any one out. For instance, others have attempted to identify the *sko,loy* as various conditions such as epilepsy, malarial fever, eyesight problems, speech difficulties, and psychosomatic disorders.⁶⁵

Others identify *sko,loy* as persecution, Alexander the coppersmith, the “ministers of

Satan” at Corinth, the Corinthian congregation itself, or with sensual temptations.⁶⁶ He may have endured some or all of these conditions, or other difficulties; we cannot know for certain.

Paul further describes the complex imagery of the *sko,loy*. He calls it a “messenger of Satan” (*aggeloy Satana*, 2 Cor. 12:7). Interestingly, *sko,loy* is used in the LXX to denote adversaries of Israel who oppress and scorn Israel (Num. 33:55; Ezek. 28:24), and this has led many to argue that the word is an idiom for oppression; however, Moo rejects this idea because there are too few occurrences of the word with this connotation to justify the position.⁶⁷ But our interpretation assumes physical and spiritual afflictions with respect to *sko,loy*, graphically represented as Paul’s personal identification with crucifixion. If he suffers sickness, it does not lead him away from Christ. But because he follows his crucified Lord, he embraces sickness as part of carrying the cross, because ultimately, sickness came into this world because of sin and God is sovereign over it. If he suffers spiritual oppression, the powers of darkness will not induce him to quit or betray Christ. The apostle considers this facet too, as another part of the complex of taking up one’s cross and following his Lord.

The biblical worldview simply includes the reality and workings of evil and elect angels, all under God. Sickness and demonic workings are often paired together in Scripture (e.g., Matt. 10:1; Luke 8:2; 13:11; Acts 10:38), though they are not always

⁶⁵ Ronald Russell, “Redemptive Suffering and Paul’s Thorn in the Flesh,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 4, no. 39 (December 1996): 566.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Douglas Moo, “Divine Healing in the Health and Wealth Gospel,” *Trinity Journal* 2, no. 9 (Fall 1988): 200.

corresponding. It was God's will that Christ suffer, yet it was at the hands of the chief priests and officers of the temple who were influenced by the powers of darkness (cf. Luke 22:53). Unfortunately, the Enlightenment has cast its shadow on much of evangelicalism's view of reality concerning angels and demons, rather than God's revelation. And so we find an evil angel buffeting and tormenting Paul, used by God in order to keep Paul humble and dependent on the Father just as the crucified Messiah was while on earth (John 5:30; 8:28, 42).

The verb "torment" (*kolafizw*, 2 Cor. 12:7), found almost exclusively in Christian literature, means to strike sharply especially with the hand or fist.⁶⁸ The use of the present tense implies that the "beating" was continual in Paul's life.⁶⁹ Mathew and Mark employ this verb to describe what the Romans soldiers did to Jesus when they struck him with their fists (cf. Matt. 26:67; Mark 14:65).

Paul petitions the Lord three times for relief, similar to Jesus' prayer in the garden (cf. Matt. 26:30ff), but the request is denied. On both occasion, God granted something that was more needful.⁷⁰ But in this negative answer, the Lord reveals the kingdom's paradigm for the apostle's plight: And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness" (12:9a).

Wuest's expanded translation assists in gaining the full measure of the original language, "My grace is enough for you, for power is moment by moment coming to its full energy and complete operation in the sphere of weakness."⁷¹ Because of the precious promise of divine empowerment, Paul ceases with petitioning for release from the crucifixion stake. Instead, he clings to his cross, and boasts in his weaknesses.

His boasting claims an enigmatic purpose, "so that the power of Christ may dwell in me" (2 Cor. 12:9b). The word "dwell" means "to set up a tent upon, to take up one's residence;" and may be a reference to the Shekinah glory of God dwelling in a tent or tabernacle.⁷² Paul may mean that the power of God descends upon

⁶⁸ Bauer, 555.

⁶⁹ Hodge, 220.

⁷⁰ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), 406.

⁷¹ Wuest, 436.

⁷² Rienecker, 495.

him and makes its abode in the frail tabernacle of his earthly body.⁷³ We turn again to Wuest’s expanded translation, “Therefore, most gladly will I the rather boast in my weaknesses in order that the power of the Christ [like the Shekinah Glory in the Holy of Holies of the Tent of Meeting] may take up its residence in me [working within me and giving me help].”⁷⁴

The dominant theme of the letter emerges once again, culminating in one of the greatest expressions of what it means to be a crucified follower of Jesus Christ, “When I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor. 12:10). Indeed, this revelation is probably what Paul considers to be one of his most profound revelations – at the very least he selects this experience to demonstrate to the super-pneumatics at Corinth that he also was acquainted better than they with visions and revelations.⁷⁵ More importantly, the revelation reveals that humility serves a supremely exalted function; it becomes *the very existence* of

Christ’s power in Paul.⁷⁶ Likewise, through this revelation, we find the exceptional construct of new-covenant ministry, serving as the sole supreme model for all who would claim to serve in Christ’s name.

Conclusion

How can I love a sovereign God when tragedy strikes? Perhaps, in light of our discussion, we should consider why a sovereign God would love people enough to bring eternal salvation to them through the greatest tragedy of all: the crucifixion of his Son. We must recover a sense of awe, both of Jesus’ death and of God’s love. We should consider more carefully our own personal tragedies in light of Christ’s crucifixion as a way to share in the sufferings of Christ, such as sharing in the weakness of the cross, in the demise of this present age, and in the paradox of new life despite tragedy.

God uses the faithfulness of his people, through tragedies, to bring salvation to others. We have seen this through the example of Paul. This truth should give us purpose so that others see our response

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Wuest, 436.

⁷⁵ Young, 81.

⁷⁶ Savage, 167.

of persevering faith, and be won to God's kingdom. God also awakens us to realize we are not sovereign through tragedy. We are humbled when our world does not turn as we thought. He rouses us to consider our own sin through tragedy and reminds us of His coming judgment through it.

Finally, God elicits faith when He does not answer all of our questions through tragedy. Jesus says, "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth" (Lk. 18:8)? In C.S. Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters* where the demon uncle Screwtape writes to a subordinate demon named Wormwood, this crucial element is brought up:

"He (God) cannot "tempt" to virtue as we do to vice. He wants them to learn to walk and must therefore take away His hand; and if only the will to walk is really there He is pleased even with their stumbles. Do not be deceived, Wormwood. Our cause is never more in danger, than when a human, no longer desiring, but intending, to do our Enemy's will, looks round upon a universe from which every trace of Him seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys."