

DEATH AND LIFE: READING 2 CORINTHIANS 4:7-12
THROUGH A TRAUMA LENS
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Introduction

Paul's understanding of the central Christian narrative of death and life is a complex, non-linear relationship that provides a framework of redemption conducive for traumatized members within the Body of Christ.

A trauma hermeneutic seeks to place the experience of traumatized individuals and communities at the centre of the analysis. Therefore, exegetical study utilizing this interpretive lens reveals aspects of the biblical text that may have otherwise been missed. While a majority of studies (both within trauma studies and biblical studies utilizing a trauma hermeneutic) predominantly focus on the negative effects of trauma, 2 Corinthians reveals a more nuanced and balanced trauma dynamic within Paul's life. As he describes his own perpetual suffering and trauma experiences throughout the letter, Paul's responses do not seem to indicate the reaction of PTSD. Rather than becoming debilitated through these painful realities, Paul exemplifies a propensity towards resilience and growth that is more in line with posttraumatic growth theory. If so, could Paul shed further light on understanding trauma and finding healing and hope? Through an exploration of the key trauma themes of death and life, along with the theoretical framework of posttraumatic growth, an exegetical study is provided over the theological climax of Paul's letter in 2 Corinthians 4:7-12. It reveals that Paul's personal usage of the themes of death and life, offers himself, and the Corinthian believers with the rationale behind his suffering and trauma. Additionally, Paul exemplifies support in how to experience suffering and trauma in a way that neither negates nor valorises painful realities.

Trauma as a Hermeneutical Lens

The problem of human suffering is woven throughout all of history with its roots entrenched in the Garden of Eden. Likewise, the area of trauma is deeply embedded in human experience. As Esterhuizen states, "Throughout history a literary and artistic record of the impact of trauma and suffering can be found in the works of poets, artists and novelists such as Shakespeare, Dickens and Munch."¹ While trauma is a common human experience, the study of trauma is comparably new, spanning just over a century.²

Trauma studies rose in popularity in the United States throughout the 1970's due to the return of Vietnam War Victims, along with the exposure of violence towards women, led by the

¹ Elizabeth Esterhuizen, "A Study of the Tension Between Despair and Hope in Isaiah 7 and 8 from a Perspective of Trauma and Posttraumatic Growth"(Ph.D. diss., University of South Africa, 2016), 20.

² Esterhuizen, *Study of Tension*, 20.

women's liberation movement.³ This awareness of a growing population of trauma survivors led psychologists to begin categorizing trauma as a distinct category of suffering that overwhelms an individual or community to the point of being unable to cope and function within daily life.⁴ Through the development of neuroscience, the diagnosis of trauma as a disorder, and the depth of knowledge gained surrounding violence and its impact, trauma studies has changed dramatically throughout the last century and now accounts for various degrees of trauma: historical trauma, institutional trauma, and global trauma.⁵

The exploration of trauma within biblical studies is even more recent. Starting in the late 1990s, scholars began to examine Scripture through the lens of trauma studies. Garber explains the reason for this recent interest is due to “the rise of psychological biblical criticism, poststructuralist and postmodern biblical interpretation, ideological criticism, and postcolonial theory.”⁶ Boase and Frechette are proponents of this methodology and argue that a trauma sensitive approach in biblical studies enables heightened awareness of “human experience that reveals meaning not captured by the plain sense of the text.”⁷

Trauma within biblical studies should not be understood as a singular, stand-alone hermeneutical methodology. Rather, it is best understood as a hermeneutical lens or “heuristic framework” that should be paired with various theoretical or historical critical hermeneutical methodologies.⁸ This multifaceted framework contains the three disciplines of psychology, sociology, and literary and cultural studies. Each of these disciplines is unique and serves to inform the other two.⁹

When a trauma hermeneutic is paired with other methodologies, trauma studies not only gleans new insights within biblical material, but the inverse is also true. Biblical studies has a unique vantage point regarding identity, suffering, and especially methods of healing, recovery, and continued growth. Therefore, trauma studies not only impacts biblical studies, but biblical studies serves to inform our understanding of trauma as well.¹⁰

³ Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery The Aftermath of Violence From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 2; For an in depth review of the history of trauma studies see Bessel Van Der Kolk, *Traumatic Stress The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society* (New York: Guilford Press, 1996).

⁴ Elizabeth Boase and Christopher G. Frechette, *Bible Through the Lens of Trauma* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016), 1.

⁵ Esterhuizen, *Study of Tension*, 26.

⁶ David G. Garber Jr., “Trauma Theory and Biblical Studies,” *CBR* (2014): 25.

⁷ Boase and Frechette, *Lens of Trauma*, 13.

⁸ Boase, Frechette, *Lens of Trauma*, 13.

⁹ Boase, Frechette, *Lens of Trauma*, 4.

¹⁰ Eve-Marie, Becker, *Trauma and Traumatization in Individual and Collective Dimensions Insights from Biblical Studies* (Gottingen: Vandenhoech and Ruprecht, 2014), 26.

Defining Terminology

The word “trauma” comes from the Greek word τραῦμα, meaning, “wound,” and was first used as a reference to psychological wounding.¹¹ Hess provides a simplified trauma description: “An extremely stressful event that elicits an intense sense of helplessness, fear, and loss of control.”¹² This experience is distinct from other “normal” daily stressors, even if those stressors trigger high anxiety. Trauma differs from suffering in that suffering, over time, can be integrated into one’s understanding and worldview. Therefore, trauma is suffering that persists.¹³ It is important to note that trauma can characterise both the actual event itself, as well as one’s response to the event and therefore can last for “months, years, or even decades after the trauma has ended.”¹⁴ Because of this, the aftermath of trauma often alters one’s experience of life within the ongoingness of death, as well as the experience of being in one’s body. These categories of life, death, and the body are important trauma themes which will be further explored in sections 1.4 and 1.5.

Scholars use a variety of terminology to identify the varying degrees of trauma reactions. The term, “trauma” typically refers to the event or experience, while “posttraumatic stress” (PTS) or “posttraumatic stress disorder” (PTSD) refer to the symptoms that develop in the aftermath of the trauma.¹⁵ Symptoms and reactions of PTS are the body’s normal responses to extremely overwhelming experiences that can include memory intrusion, avoidance, and arousal.¹⁶ These reactions vary in levels of intensity, which is why PTS exists on a spectrum. Once the PTS reaches a certain point of intensity, an individual is said to have PTSD.¹⁷

With this understanding in mind, it is important to emphasize that not everyone who experiences trauma develops PTSD. In fact, research shows “only a minority of people develop PTSD; of those, only a minority develop persistent PTSD; and only half of those whose problems are persistent do not benefit from treatment.”¹⁸ Interestingly, regardless of the prevalence of PTS, emphasis within biblical studies utilizing a trauma hermeneutic (especially within 2 Corinthians) has tended to focus predominantly on the experience of PTSD. Joseph describes the current imbalance within trauma studies stating,

Our criterion for successful treatment has become confined to the alleviation of PTSD, which leads us to disregard the body of research showing not only that most people are resilient but also

¹¹ Stephen Joseph, *What Doesn’t Kill Us: New Psychology of Posttraumatic Growth* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 42.

¹² Cynthia Hess, *Sites of Violence, Sites of Grace Christian Nonviolence and the Traumatized Self* (London: Lexington Books, 2009), 36.

¹³ Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (Louisville: WJK Press, 2010), 156.

¹⁴ Hess, *Sites of Violence*, 36.

¹⁵ Hess, *Sites of Violence*, 36.

¹⁶ Joseph, *What Doesn’t Kill Us*, 83.

¹⁷ Joseph, *What Doesn’t Kill Us*, 60.

¹⁸ Joseph, *What Doesn’t Kill Us*, 84.

that many people find benefits in adversity that can provide a springboard to higher levels of functioning than before. Posttraumatic reactions are not one-sided phenomena but multifaceted, encompassing both distress and growth. People are capable of finding pathways to reverse the destructiveness of trauma and turn it to their advantage. Such observations have in the past been treated as exceptions to the rule—as little more than interesting anecdotes—rather than being seen as part of the very nature of trauma. Therapists who fail to recognize this possibility of growth in their clients do them a disservice.¹⁹

As Joseph indicates, the possibility of growth following the experience of trauma must also be emphasized. Tedeschi, Park, and Calhoun agree with Joseph that the majority of trauma studies thus far have tended to focus on the “maladaptive behaviour observed in those who have experienced traumatic events.”²⁰ This stands in contrast to the very small amount of research done describing “how these negative outcomes might be prevented, and how some persons cope successfully with negative events.”²¹ From a biblical studies perspective, the concept of growth following trauma reveals new layers of exploration within the realm of trauma, especially within biblical texts such as 2 Corinthians where trauma elements are present, yet where definitions in line with PTSD do not seem to represent Paul’s experience.

Posttraumatic Growth

While the concept of growth following adversity is as old as suffering and trauma itself, the term “posttraumatic growth” (PTG) was only first used within the last twenty years.²² Posttraumatic growth is both a process and an outcome which develops “out of a cognitive process that is initiated to cope with traumatic events that extract an extreme cognitive and emotional toll.”²³ This theory reveals the paradoxical reality of trauma which “encompasses both shadows and light.”²⁴ In other words, even in the most traumatic of situations, the experiences of death and despair can coexist with the experiences of life, hope, and growth.²⁵

Posttraumatic growth reveals how PTS can actually become the “engine” of growth to lead people not only to healing and resilience, but to growth that may never have occurred outside of the trauma event itself.²⁶ This does not mean, however, that suffering should be sought after as a “good” in itself. Rather, the focus of PTG is to “examine the phenomenon in which suffering and grief can co-exist with enlightenment and growth.”²⁷ This examination of growth

¹⁹ Joseph, *What Doesn’t Kill Us*, 18-19.

²⁰ Richard G. Tedeschi, Crystal L. Park, and Lawrence G. Calhoun, *Posttraumatic Growth Positive Changes in the Aftermath of Crisis* (New Jersey: LEA Publishers, 1998), 1.

²¹ Tedeschi, Park, and Calhoun, *Posttraumatic Growth*, 1.

²² Joseph, *What Doesn’t Kill Us*, 94.

²³ Tedeschi, Park, and Calhoun, *Posttraumatic*, 1.

²⁴ Joseph, *What Doesn’t Kill Us*, 185.

²⁵ Tedeschi, Park, and Calhoun, *Posttraumatic*, 3.

²⁶ Joseph, *What Doesn’t Kill Us*, 187.

²⁷ Kate Hefferon, *Corporeality and Trauma the Role of the Body in Posttraumatic Growth*, <http://www.ippanetwork.org>.

includes the following domains: perceived changes in self, improved relationships, changed life philosophy, changed priorities, and enhanced spiritual beliefs.²⁸ However, not all five categories must be exemplified for PTG to be experienced. Even if only one is present is enough to indicate PTG.²⁹

The letter of 2 Corinthians reveals aspects of death and despair brought on by suffering and trauma while simultaneously portraying increased hope and faith (i.e. growth). Although anachronistic to 2 Corinthians, the theory of PTG offers additional insights pertaining to trauma, healing, growth, fostering resilience, and communal identity within both the 1st and 21st century contexts.³⁰

With this trauma hermeneutic and theoretical definitions in mind, a closer look at two experiential trauma themes will be explored.

Death, Life, and Trauma

As previously stated, the theme of death, life, and the body are important experiential categories within trauma studies. Interestingly, starting with Paul's own personal trauma experience in 2 Corinthians 1:8-10, Paul develops death and life as a key motif throughout the rest of his letter (2 Corinthians 1:8-10; 2:14-16; 4:10-12; 5:14-15; 6:9; 13:4). This death and life motif melds together with an in-depth discussion surrounding the body to form the theological climax of his letter (4:16-5:10).³¹ Therefore, in order to better inform our trauma hermeneutic in 2 Corinthians 4:7-12, it is necessary to further explore the trauma themes of death, life, and the body.

Cathy Caruth, a leading scholar in trauma studies, describes trauma through emphasizing its dual nature. Within this framework, Caruth poses the following question: "Is the trauma the encounter with death or the ongoing experiences of having survived it?"³² She concludes it is the "double telling" of trauma that pendulates "between a crisis of death and the correlative crisis of life."³³ In other words, the traumatic event contains a kind of death along with despair. However, it is in the aftermath of trauma where there exists the perpetual experience of recurring death held together within the tension of "new" life.³⁴ Therefore, Caruth argues the relationship between death and life are incompatible, yet inseparable. It is this complex reality of death which

²⁸ Hefferon, Corporeality.

²⁹ Esterhuizen, *Study of Tension*, 34.

³⁰ This paper recognizes that trauma as we understand it today is not a framework in the mind of Paul as he writes 2 Corinthians.

³¹ Kar Yong Lim, *The Sufferings of Christ are Abundant in Us A Narrative Dynamics Investigation of Paul's Sufferings in 2 Corinthians* (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 33.

³² Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press: 1996), 7.

³³ Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 7.

³⁴ By "new" I do not mean to imply that life is somehow "better" after trauma, rather, that life is utterly different.

remains in the afterlife of trauma that calls for a reinterpretation of the familiar scriptural narratives surrounding death and life.

Shelly Rambo, one of the leading trauma theologians, builds off Caruth's work, especially relating to the complex relationship between death and life that trauma provides. She states, "I claim that trauma returns theologians to our primary claims about death and life."³⁵ The reality of trauma and its dualistic nature disrupts an interpretation of the redemption narrative that places death and life on opposite sides of the spectrum. In other words, "theology must account for the excess, or remainder, of death in life that is central to trauma."³⁶ Rambo describes the space between the cross and resurrection where death and life coexist as the "middle."³⁷

From a PTG framework, this "middle" ground which exists within the complex relationship between death and life (or despair and hope) is seen to hold vast opportunities. The death, despair, and tension within posttraumatic stress can become the driving factor for growth both individually and communally. However, in order for this to happen "survivors must steer themselves in the right direction using active coping strategies."³⁸

While there are a multitude of coping strategies, one crucial strategy is found within the act of meaning making.³⁹ Joseph argues the ability to find meaning is intricately tied to narrative, stating:

Human beings are storytellers. It is human nature to make meaning of our lives by organizing what happens to us into stories. . . We tell stories to understand what happens to us and to provide us with a framework to shape new experiences.⁴⁰

This act of storytelling and meaning making is beneficial for constructing a strong sense of self, which often is ruptured by trauma. Hess agrees with Joseph stating how the "placement of one's trauma into a larger narrative can transform the effects of trauma."⁴¹ However, in order for healing to take place, the larger narrative must "both acknowledge the reality of violence and offer some hope for a better future."⁴² This action of living into a larger narrative enables survivors to see from a vantage point that includes their trauma while also revealing a perspective of life that consists of more than the trauma. In this space, theology and the Story of

³⁵ Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 6.

³⁶ Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 6.

³⁷ Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 6.

³⁸ Joseph, *What Doesn't Kill Us*, 150.

³⁹ Crystal L. Park, "Meaning Making Model: A Framework for Understanding Meaning, Spirituality, and Stress-Related Growth in Health Psychology," *EHP* (2013): 40.

⁴⁰ Joseph, *What Doesn't Kill Us*, 124.

⁴¹ Hess, *Sites of Violence*, 113.

⁴² Hess, *Sites of Violence*, 113.

God have much to offer as both are a “meaning-making enterprise.”⁴³ The Story of God is woven throughout the entirety of Scripture to reveal a cosmic reality of a God who not only experienced trauma, but who also makes a way for His people to be transformed in the midst of their trauma through participating and placing their story into His grand narrative.

In light of these trauma categories, we now turn to explore two important themes in 2 Corinthians.

Motif of Suffering and Trauma in 2 Corinthians

While there are several notable motifs in 2 Corinthians, the emphasis will be given to the motif of suffering and trauma.⁴⁴

The overarching motif of suffering is developed at key points throughout Paul’s letter and is often accompanied with theological exhortation which serves to interpret and give significance to the experience of suffering (2 Cor 1:3-11; 2:14-16; 4:7-12; 6:1-10; 11:23-12:10).⁴⁵ This reveals the importance suffering has in the life of Paul, as well as how the Corinthians struggled to accept this reality not only in Paul’s life, but also in their own.

Although the Corinthian believers wrestled to accept Paul’s theological basis behind his understanding of affliction, the topic of adversity was common within the Greco-Roman tradition and not always viewed in a negative light.⁴⁶ For example, in the area of traumatic wounding, scars obtained in an act of courage within a battle or for other noble acts provided an opportunity to prove one’s endurance and masculinity.⁴⁷ Plutarch, a 1st century Greek Philosopher, gives testimony to this stating, “He did cover over nor hide his scars, but bore them openly as symbolic representations, graven on his body, or virtue and manly courage.”⁴⁸ Additionally, in line with the Roman imperial influence, if one could overcome their affliction with power and triumph through their own strength and perseverance, then they also had reason to boast.⁴⁹ Conversely, if a person received affliction through shameful means, this was perceived negatively. For example, wounds received on the body through whipping, (like Paul’s

⁴³A. Groenewald, “Trauma is Suffering that Remains the Contribution of Trauma Studies to Prophetic Studies,” *Acta Theologica* 26 (2018): 90.

⁴⁴ Other notable motifs are: comfort and deliverance, solidarity with Christ and the believers, and Paul’s usage of hyperbolic language. (Lim, *Sufferings of Christ*, 32-34).

⁴⁵ Lim, *Sufferings of Christ*, 32.

⁴⁶ Wenhua Shi, *Paul’s Message of the Cross as Body Language* (Tubingen: Laupp & Gobel, 2008), 225.

⁴⁷ Shi, *Paul’s Message*, 225.

⁴⁸ Shi, *Paul’s Message*, 218.

⁴⁹ Mitzi L. Minor, *2 Corinthians* (Georgia: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc., 2009), 91.

experience in 11:23-26) would have been considered shameful and “diminishing of one’s manhood” because it was commonly used as a slave’s punishment by the Romans.⁵⁰

It seems as though the Corinthians held onto their Roman “triumphalist” mentality even after they came to faith.⁵¹ As Minor suggests, the believers “understood their religion to enable them “to come out on top” or be triumphant over people and circumstances.”⁵² Therefore, as Paul experienced and boasted in his many afflictions that were considered “shameful” (2 Cor 11:23-29), it is not surprising the Corinthian believers looked to other leaders who exemplified their Greco-Roman culture (2 Cor 11:1-5). Throughout 2 Corinthians, however, Paul continually returns to the conviction that suffering is an inevitable reality for the ones who follow in the footsteps and mission of the suffering and trauma-ridden Messiah. Due to this Christological framework, Paul views his sufferings as intimately connected with Christ’s sufferings, which allows him to experience the comfort of Christ (2 Cor 1:4-5), and further enables him to comfort and lead the Corinthians (2 Cor 1:7). Davey describes this close identification with Christ stating,

Paul insists time and again that the Christian community must ‘play Christ’ by sharing in Christ’s suffering. Just as suffering (and death) preceded resurrection and glory for Christ, so suffering (and death) must precede resurrection and glory for all those who acknowledge Jesus as Lord.⁵³

In other words, this interconnected, relational reality between God, Paul, and the Corinthian believers can only be grasped through the lens of Paul’s theological understanding of what it means to be found “in Christ” (2 Cor 5:17).

Within the suffering motif, the distinct category of trauma must also be recognized.⁵⁴ Unfortunately, 2 Corinthians has been poorly represented within the realm of trauma in biblical studies, perhaps due to viewing suffering, and potentially trauma, as a valorised or glorified reality for believers.⁵⁵ However, despite Paul viewing suffering as intrinsic, he does not seem to place value in the suffering itself, nor does he seek it out for its own sake. Suffering (and his experiences of trauma) are the result of living a Christlike life that opposes the powers of the

⁵⁰ Interestingly, this form of suffering was closely related with sexual abuse as both were “invasive and demaning.” This sort of bodily violation did not coexist with what it meant to be a respectable male in authority (Shi, *Paul’s Message*, 218).

⁵¹ Minor explains how the Corinthian believers “claimed to be filled with the Spirit [1 Cor 2:12-15] possessing all they want, and living like kings; they were rich [1 Cor 4:8], wise, strong, and honored [1 Cor 4:8].” (Minor, *2 Corinthians*, 13.)

⁵² Minor, *2 Corinthians*, 13.

⁵³ Wesley Thomas Davey, “Playing Christ Participation and Suffering in the Letters of Paul,” *CBR* (2019): 327.

⁵⁴ By utilizing the word “trauma” we do not mean to imply that Paul understood his Asia experience as “traumatic” in the way it is understood in the present-day context. However, Paul does seem to indicate his Asia experience as a unique and more extreme experience of suffering.

⁵⁵ A brief overview of 2 Corinthians studies utilizing a trauma hermeneutic will be given at the end of Chapter 2.

world.⁵⁶ For example, in 2 Corinthians 4:1-6, Paul describes his purpose for ministry which is to “proclaim Christ” and live accordingly. He continues in verse 7 to express the affliction which is a direct result of the message he embodies. Then in verse 15 he again writes the purpose of enduring the affliction which is “so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.”

The first traumatic experience is witnessed in the opening recollection of Paul’s Asia experience (1:8-10). Paul’s description here fits within the definition of PTSD, according to Clark,

A delayed and/or protracted response to a stressful event or situation (either short- or long-lasting) of an exceptionally threatening or catastrophic nature, which is likely to cause pervasive distress in almost anyone.⁵⁷

Clark’s analysis at times seems forced, still his effort in naming Paul’s experience as “traumatic” is insightful.

Paul also mentions other moments that seem to contain traces of trauma, such as 2 Corinthians 11:23-33. Here Paul lists multiple situations when he was “often near death” (11:23) before relaying his “thorn in the flesh” experience with vague detail (12:7-9). While chapter 12 has less explicit tones of trauma, Polaski argues Paul’s language is similar to that of trauma survivors. Just like trauma survivors, Paul is perhaps unable to form coherent language in response to his experience.⁵⁸

Acknowledging the presence of trauma elements in 2 Corinthians allows us to explore how, if at all, Paul’s personal trauma impacts his theological understanding and vice versa. A trauma hermeneutic also shifts the focus of the text from solely centring on Paul’s defence of suffering, to a wider picture on how Paul copes with the tension of despair and hope found within trauma and suffering. Boase and Frechette explain that whether or not a text was formed in trauma or with the possibility of trauma, a trauma hermeneutic seeks to explore how the biblical text works to form a stronger individual and communal identity.⁵⁹

Now, let us turn to 2 Cor 4:7-12 for more details in relation to Paul’s trauma narrative.

⁵⁶ Hess, *Sites of Violence*, 117.

⁵⁷ Peter Yuichi Clark, “Toward a Pastoral Reading of 2 Corinthians as a Memoir of PTSD and Healing,” in *Bible Through the Lens of Trauma* (ed. Elizabeth Boase and Christopher G. Frechette; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016), 235. Additionally, Clark admits Paul could be speaking hyperbolically about his experience. In fact, Paul himself uses the word, *hyperbolēn* in verse 8. Still, Clark believes trauma studies offer a unique perspective regarding Paul’s experience as Paul’s pertral points to psychological distress.

⁵⁸ Sandra Hack Polaski, “2 Corinthians 12:1-10,” *Review & Expositor* (2008): 278. Polaski utilizes the “Shattered Assumptions Theory.” For an in depth exposition see Ronnie Janoff-Bulman, *Shattered Assumptions* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

⁵⁹ Boase and Frechette, *Bible Through the Lens*, 14-15.

Death and life in 2 Corinthians 4:7-12

Following Paul's opening sentiments and recollection of his traumatic Asia experience in 2 Corinthians 1:3-11, Paul addresses the issues of his integrity in relation to travel plans (1:12-24), and reconciliation with the sinner (2:1-11), before transitioning into reflections on the dynamics and characteristics of Christian ministry (2:14-4:6).⁶⁰ Throughout these passages Paul's writing weaves itself around the motif of suffering as he explains the nature of authentic ministry and the consequential division that results from the truth of the gospel message. Next, Paul goes into a lengthy discussion surrounding the old glory as experienced through the law of Moses, in comparison to the new covenant glory experienced through the Holy Spirit (3:1-18). Finally, he concludes this formative section with the purpose of his ministry which, as Paul writes, is to "proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake" (4:5b).

Second Corinthians 4:7-5:10 marks the beginning of a cohesive unit that contains the smaller unit of 4:7-12. Although Paul is continuing his discussion about the nature of Christian ministry, this brief unit contains a shift in tone as he reaches the pinnacle of his theological foundation in verses 10-12. Verse 7 serves as a thesis-like statement that Paul uses to reference his own fragility in relation to God's sustaining power. He then transitions into the well-known *peristasis* catalogue in verses 8-9 which consists of four antithetical statements used to describe his own personal hardship in relation to God's power.⁶¹ In verses 10-12, the climax of the entire letter, Paul describes his Christological framework in "relation to himself (4:10-11), his missional theology (4:12) and the Corinthians (4:12b, cf. 4:15)."⁶²

Death in the Body (4:10a)

Paul writes, "Always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies" (2 Cor 4:10).

Paul's somatic description regarding carrying the death and life of Christ in his body extends past mere logic or cognitive reasoning to reveal a profound unity and solidarity with the Christological narrative and with Christ Himself. Paul embodies this death and life narrative as a pattern of life, and also utilizes it as the interpretive lens, especially in moments of affliction.

Paul's palpable language seems to stem, at least in part, from his near-death Asia experience due to the language and theme in his theological death and life exhortation (2 Cor 4:7-12) being strikingly similar to the language and theme used in his recollection of his traumatic Asia experience (2 Cor 1:8-10).⁶³

⁶⁰ George H. Guthrie, *2 Corinthians Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Baker Academy: 2015), 203.

⁶¹ Lim, *Sufferings of Christ*, 97-98.

⁶² Lim, *Sufferings of Christ*, 98.

⁶³ Lim, *Sufferings of Christ*, 99.

In verses 10-12, Paul discusses the theme of death and life three times, directly connecting it back to his previous passage in 1:8-10 where he first establishes this important theme (2 Cor 2:14-16, 4:10-12; 5:14-15; 6:9; 13:4).⁶⁴ As previously mentioned, Paul's language in verses 10-12 (and vv. 7-9) closely parallels his Asia experience: e.g. "excessively" or "surpassing greatness" (1:8, 4:7), "strength" or "power" (1:8, 4:7), "despair" (1:8, 4:8), "of life" or "who live" (1:8, 4:11), "death" (1:9, 1:10, 4:11, 4:12), "which is effective" or "works" (1:6, 4:12).⁶⁵ Lim describes these connections as "overwhelming similarity in both vocabulary and theme."⁶⁶ Therefore, it is apparent Paul's memory of his own personal trauma experience is tied to his bodily experience of what it means to carry in his body the death and life of Christ.

Continuing with verse 10, the Greek word Paul uses for "death" is, νέκρωσιν, a noun, and can be translated: "the process of dying" or "the state of deadness."⁶⁷ Although the rarity of its usage makes for a challenging interpretation, most scholars agree that considering the wider context of chapter 4, "the process of dying" makes the most sense.⁶⁸

The understanding of death as a process places Jesus' incarnate life at the centre of Paul's focus thereby revealing a wider Christological narrative. Brondos argues this point extensively stating, "Christ's earthly ministry becomes 'the dying of Jesus', thereby investing the incarnation and not just the crucifixion with redemptive value."⁶⁹ For this reason, Paul understands the "the whole course of Jesus' life as 'dying', a being given up to death, just as he is thinking of the whole of the apostolic life in that way."⁷⁰ This does not mean that Paul is downplaying the importance of the cross nor his identification with it. Rather, as Paul reflects on his own trauma and suffering, carrying the death of Jesus includes the cross, as well as Jesus' other "hardships and troubles that took their daily toll" along with Jesus' pattern of selfless love given on behalf of the other.⁷¹

Through his close identification with Jesus' death, Paul is building a robust theological framework for the Corinthian believers. First, Paul is normalizing the experience of affliction.⁷² As stated in chapter 3, this does not mean that Paul is valorising suffering (or trauma for that matter) as something to seek after in and of itself. He does, however, understand it to be part of

⁶⁴ Lim, *Sufferings of Christ*, 33.

⁶⁵ Lim, *Sufferings of Christ*, 33.

⁶⁶ Lim, *Sufferings of Christ*, 99.

⁶⁷ Michael Byron, *Confirmation to the Death of Christ and the Hope of the Resurrection: An Exegetico-Theological Study of 2 Corinthians 4:7-15 and Philippians 3* (Rome: Editrice Pontificia Universita Gregoriana, 2003), 63.

⁶⁸ Lim, *Sufferings of Christ*, 110.

⁶⁹ Linda L. Belleville "Gospel and Kerygma in 2 Corinthians- and Others." in *Gospel in Paul Studies on Corinthians, Galatians and Romans For Richard N. Longenecker* (ed. L. Ann Jervis and Peter Richardson; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 164.

⁷⁰ Lim, *Sufferings of Christ*, 110.

⁷¹ Belleville, *Gospel*, 142.

⁷² Guthrie, *2 Corinthians*, 259.

the normative experience for a Christ follower who chooses to live like Christ and not conform to cultural expectations or earthly kingdoms and powers.

Secondly, Paul's resounding point is that experiencing hardships and troubles is part of the "process of dying" and resembles the life of Christ. Therefore, affliction and weakness does not take away his credentials as a minister of the Gospel, but rather reveals its true authenticity. Through this close identification with Christ's death, Paul is at work forming a community who recognizes the positions of those who are weak, the marginalized, the traumatized, the ones deemed by society as "less-than" as those who are actually in the prime position to reveal the treasure of Christ. Consequently, the fragility and vulnerability of Paul's existence, which he describes earlier in verse 7 as a "clay jar" should be accepted because it enables him to more prominently reveal the treasure and power of the Gospel that resides within him (2 Cor 4:7).

Finally, on an experiential note, Paul shows an incredible ability to endure unremitting suffering, as well as traumatic experiences while simultaneously exemplifying not only resilience, but also a propensity towards increased hope and trust in God. An example of this is also seen in 2 Corinthians 12 as Paul describes his despair surrounding the "thorn in his flesh" (2 Cor 12:9-10). Paul pleads for the experience to be taken from him, God strengthens him in his need, and Paul in turn moves towards contentment and greater trust even though the "torment" remains (2 Cor 12:7). Paul's ability to hold both despair and hope without diminishing or negating one reality in place of the other seems to be partially due to his ability to recontextualize his own trauma narrative (and other experiences of suffering) within the greater narrative of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. If Christ experienced the tension of death in life, then Paul too would receive this reality with open hands.

Life in the Body (4:10b)

In the second half of verse 10, Paul reveals the purpose behind this profound embodiment of Jesus' death stating, "So that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies." Here, as well as in verse 11, Paul's understanding of "life" refers to Jesus' resurrected life.⁷³ Seifrid explains, "The earthly life of the apostle is thereby transcended by "the life of Jesus," that is, the life of the risen Lord, which is manifest in him."⁷⁴ This resurrected life is not an experience reserved for a future time, rather Paul's focus is "inaugurated eschatology," in other words, the "already and not yet" dimension of faith. As Paul and his team are "afflicted in every way," "crushed," "persecuted," and "struck down" (2 Cor 4:8-9) they are not pushed to the place of total despair because through the daily experience of death, they are further enabled to experience resurrected life (2 Cor 4:10-11). This is a theme that Paul will continue to develop throughout chapter 5 as well.

Once again, Paul's ability to hold in balance experiential tension is an important factor within this passage. When discussing Paul's understanding of "life," scholars have a tendency to interpret Paul's passage with an overly triumphant tone. For example, Seifrid states, "Jesus'

⁷³ Lim, *Sufferings of Christ*, 112.

⁷⁴ Mark Seifrid, *The Second Letter to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: WBE Publishing, 2014), 108.

resurrection does not undo his death: it overcomes it.”⁷⁵ Minor also maintains a more optimistic interpretive tone by arguing that Paul reflects a framework which views Jesus as “living without any reference to death. There is no death in God.” Therefore, Minor continues, just as Christ lived “as if death were not” Paul too is called to live in such a way, and in doing so is further enabled to “be possessed by the same dynamic that was at work in Jesus.”⁷⁶ Seifrid's interpretation places life over death, while Minor's interpretation suggests an invitation to ignore the presence of death altogether.⁷⁷

A more balanced view is proposed by Rambo,

Many Christians place their hope in the resurrection of Christ as a triumphant new beginning. And yet these proclamations of newness are situated within a context in which ending and beginnings, the old and the new, are much more porous. There is no clear-cut line separating the two; life is not a departure from death but, instead, a different relation to death and life. In a posttraumatic age, they exist simultaneously rather than sequentially.⁷⁸

Rambo's description regarding this entangled reality of death and life as “nonlinear” and “porous” offers an important distinction in the reading of Paul in 2 Corinthians. Paul's relationship to death simultaneously exists with his reception of resurrection life. One does not cancel out the other. When Paul discusses the reality of death and life, he does so within the framework of the “already and not yet” dimension. Although Paul confidently looks forward towards the day when death no longer is a reality (2 Cor 5:6-7), his realistic understanding of life before the Parousia allows him to experience the depths of affliction and simultaneously the fullness of the Spirit's comfort and hope. Paul writes, “For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through Christ” (2 Cor 1:5).

Brueggemann argues that Paul's view of resurrection life in the “already and not yet” reveals a kind of “eschatological buoyancy.”⁷⁹ This means, that “Paul's formulation of hope against despair is characterized as: “always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.”⁸⁰ Unfortunately, Brueggemann does not offer much explanation beyond this brief mention. However, in the context of the rest of his discussion, Brueggemann's reflection indicates that Paul's understanding of “life” is less of a

⁷⁵ Seifrid, *Second Letter*, 208.

⁷⁶ Minor, *Second Corinthians*, 90.

⁷⁷ Minor later corrects this imbalance stating, “Paul offers a radically different criterion for judging the “success” of his ministry: life in the midst of death.” (Minor, *Second Corinthians*, 91).

⁷⁸ Shelly Rambo, *Resurrecting Wounds Living in the Afterlife of Trauma* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2017), 7.

⁷⁹ Walter, Brueggemann, “Reading From the Day In-Between.” in *A Shadow of Glory : Reading the New Testament after the Holocaust* (ed. Tod Linafelt; New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2002), 114.

⁸⁰ Brueggemann, *Reading From the Day*, 118.

“triumphant joy” and more in line with “modest joy” which reflects the “delicate relationship of the Easter victory and the Final Victory in the Second Coming.”⁸¹

This sort of “modest joy” is especially evident in chapters 4 and 5 of Paul’s letter. For example, in 2 Corinthians 5:1-21, Paul passionately expounds on what has occurred through the Christ event. Because of Christ’s death on the cross (5:14), a new creation has been ushered in which leads Paul to proclaim: “see, everything has become new!” (5:17). Jesus Christ has made a way for forgiveness, reconciliation, and the invitation to become the “righteousness of God” (5:18-21). According to Paul, living in this new creation means living within Christ’s “principles and mandates,” a reality Paul does not take lightly.⁸² However, this “new creation” language is set within the context of a tempered tone as Paul exclaims several verses earlier, “So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day” (4:16). It is this “already and not yet” vantage point that provides Paul with “hope that is as realistic on the ground as it is buoyant about the promises.”⁸³

Therefore, according to Paul, being filled with resurrection life in the present moment does not overcome death, nor does it alleviate or rescue him from painful realities. Instead, Paul’s complex view of redemption views death and life as intertwined reality that together provide greater opportunity to reveal the sustaining and powerful presence of a loving God who meets Paul in the midst of his pain (2 Cor 1:8-10; 4:7-12; 6:4-10; 11:22-33; 12:8-10).

Sacrifice in the Body (4:11-12)

Paul writes in verse 11, “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.” Upon first reading, verses 10 and 11 seem to be repetitive. However, a closer look into Paul’s phrase, “being given up to death” reveals a difference in Paul’s language for “death.”⁸⁴ The word Paul uses here is θάνατος, which is the more familiar word for “death” and typically refers to “final fate, rather than the daily dying that he endures by his hardships,” which is what Paul refers to in verse 10.⁸⁵ Paul connects this with the earlier verb, παραδίδωμι, “to deliver” or “to give into the hands (of another),” which is typically found within the context of Jesus’ shameful death and sacrificial action of pouring Himself out in selfless love for the sake of the world.⁸⁶ Following in verse 11, the life of Jesus (again repeated by Paul) is shown through Paul’s embodiment of the cruciform pattern of Christ’s selfless love for the sake of others. In many ways verse 11 shifts the focus from discussing his affliction to emphasizing his life’s motivation. Paul’s desire to reveal the life

⁸¹ Brueggemann, *Reading From the Day*, 118.

⁸² Guthrie, *2 Corinthians*, 308.

⁸³ Brueggemann, *Reading From the Day*, 114.

⁸⁴ Lim, *Sufferings of Christ*, 114.

⁸⁵ Frank J. Matera, *Second Corinthians A Commentary* (Kentucky: WJK Press, 2013), 111.

⁸⁶ Lim, *Sufferings of Christ*, 115.

of Jesus “can only be manifest by Paul incarnating Jesus’ self-emptying mode of existence, a manner of living that brings life to others (2 Cor 4:12; cf. Phil. 2:5-11; 3:10).”⁸⁷

In verse 12, Paul concludes his theological exhortation by reflecting on his relationship with the Corinthians. Paul writes in verse 12, “So death is at work in us, but life in you.” Paul’s sufferings and trauma experiences are not meaningless, rather he sees them as being used for the purpose of encouraging the believers. Paul’s understanding here reveals several interesting points. Similar to how Christ’s death brought life to all believers, Paul’s suffering and trauma also have a mediatory function (a theme first developed in 2 Corinthians 1:3-7). Paul’s afflictions serve to encourage the Corinthians as he selflessly pours himself out for the sake of love. Therefore, just like Christ exemplified, Paul holds the tension of hardship, pain, and at times despair while simultaneously growing in hope and new life as the Spirit meets him in his weakness. Through this process, Christ’s resurrection life and power are on full display. As the Corinthians acknowledge this reality, they too are enabled to participate fully in the life of Jesus even through affliction.

PTG and 2 Corinthians

In the aftermath of Paul’s own trauma, and the ongoing nature of suffering, Paul exemplifies not only resiliency, but also PTG in the way that his PTS helps spur him to further hope and restoration.

While the purpose of this study is not to prove whether Paul experienced PTG, a brief mention of his possible growth is relevant to the overall discussion. As stated previously, there are five main domains of PTG, however only one or two domains need to be present for growth to be achieved.⁸⁸ Paul seems to fall most clearly within the domain of “enhanced spiritual beliefs.” As Paul experiences affliction, (surrounding his Asia experience, as well as his experience of death and life), Paul is led towards greater closeness and trust in Christ (2 Cor 4:16-18; 5:17). A portion of Paul’s ability to have PTG as an outcome, is due to his process of PTG through various effective coping mechanisms.

Paul’s process of coping with his suffering and trauma seems to be partially due to his solidarity with Christ, along with his determination to find meaning through placing his own story within the incarnate narrative of Christ. This is because the Christological narrative includes elements of despair, suffering, and trauma alongside moments of life, hope, and transformation. In other words, it is the “multivocality” of the cross, as well as Jesus’ life and resurrection that provides a conducive narrative for healing and growth. Hess states, “The cross, as the convergence of the old and new aeons, can thus be a symbol that heals as well as one that terrifies. It is the inbreaking of the kingdom as well as an event of traumatic violence.”⁸⁹ It is within this framework that Paul displays honesty and vulnerability in dealing with afflictions. He does not negate or minimize his painful experiences, rather he finds meaning and purpose as he

⁸⁷ Lim, *Sufferings of Christ*, 113.

⁸⁸ Esterhuizen, *Study of Tension*, 34.

⁸⁹ Hess, *Sites of Violence*, 120.

patterns his life in Christ and thereby receives comfort, encouragement, and strength in abundance (2 Cor 1:3-4, 10-11; 4:16; 5:7-8; 12:8-10). Because of his close identification with Christ, Paul is enabled to reveal the Gospel to a watching world as the Spirit meets him in his weakness, and to assimilate his own trauma and perpetual suffering as he restores relationship with a community who in turn is being shaped by his example (2 Cor 1:6-7).

Paul also brings a temporal perspective to the experience of trauma. Not only does he recontextualize his own trauma narrative within the greater narrative of Christ who experiences both pain as well as life, but he also places his trauma and suffering within the vantage point of the “already and not yet.” Paul’s vantage point perceives all of history moving towards Christ’s return. Therefore, premature triumphalism does not fit within Paul’s understanding of living in this middle space. The time in between the Christ event and the Parousia holds the reality of death and life as entangled and closely related. Because of this, Paul acknowledges pain, despair, and fear and recognizes these “weaknesses” as places where the Spirit of God desires to enter, sustain, and empower for the sake of the Gospel. This reveals Paul’s robust pneumatology.

Therefore, Paul’s contribution to trauma studies may very well be his understanding of the Holy One who is present in the midst of all trauma and suffering and who is at work transforming all of creation.

Reflection for the Church

Due to the intricately connected nature of the Body of Christ, when one member is traumatized, this trauma reverberates throughout the entire Body of Christ thereby affecting every member.⁹⁰ Trauma’s far reaching effects in the Body of Christ (as well as outside of the Body of Christ) indicates the necessity of providing a biblical interpretation that offers articulate theological language for this reality as well as sensitivity to the unique impact trauma has on individuals and communities. The failure to do so could result in further traumatization in the lives of those who are in need of hope and healing. Therefore, preachers, teachers, and lay people should strive to be attuned towards the movements within Scripture that give witness to the effects of trauma, in order to offer deeper healing, hope, and resilience to those in our midst whose bodies carry trauma from the past or present moments, or who will face trauma in the future.

Conclusion

The focus within trauma studies, as well as biblical studies utilizing a trauma hermeneutic, has predominantly been on PTSD with emphasis placed on the debilitating effects of trauma. However, since only a minority of traumatized individuals develop PTSD, the theory of PTG provides a helpful balance by revealing the nature of trauma which contains both death and despair along with life and hope. Understanding this paradox, can help survivors’ PTS become the engine towards the process and outcome of growth.

⁹⁰ O’Donnell, Karen, *Broken Bodies: The Eucharist, Mary and the Body in Trauma Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2019), 1.

The literary context of 2 Corinthians communicates the motif of suffering along with the distinct category of trauma which reveals awareness behind not only why Paul suffers, but how he suffers. Paul's example of coping with affliction implicitly influences the Corinthian believers to help form a resilient faith community that cares for one another in their need as they pattern their lives after Christ.

Paul's ability to experience growth in the wake of trauma is due to the empowering presence of the Spirit, his solidarity with Christ, and his theological understanding of death as a process in relation to the incarnate life of Christ. This robust framework allows Paul to recontextualize his experiences and create space for death to exist tangled together with resurrection life. This process in turn infuses each painful moment with meaning and reveals every moment to be an opportunity for the power of God to be revealed. As we begin to understand the depth of Paul's perspective, it becomes clear that he provides a framework of redemption conducive for traumatized members within the Body of Christ.

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