

## Article

# 'He Will Rescue Us Again': Affliction and Hope in 2 Corinthians 1:8–11

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Received: 17 February 2020; Accepted: 24 April 2020; Published: 1 May 2020



**Abstract:** Dark times can generate crippling despair all too easily. Resources for resistance to despair and for the discovery and articulation of hope are not always readily apparent. This essay considers Paul's account of his own immersion in such a situation: An 'affliction' that left him 'unbearably crushed', 'despairing of life itself' (2 Cor 1:9), and under a 'sentence of death' (2 Cor 1:10). Making a speculative proposal about the nature of Paul's experience, the essay goes on to argue that Paul identified two fundamental resources for hope. The first is a conviction about an eschatological act that undoes the sentence of death and effects the possibility of rescue or deliverance. The second is a form of human solidarity that generates potential reorientation to the reality of 'rescue'. While the essay explores these ideas within the terms and framework of Paul's rhetoric in 2 Corinthians, it will do so with one clear eye on the potential resources that Pauline theology offers those who live in inexplicably dark times today, not least by considering the potential resources for political optimism.

**Keywords:** 2 Corinthians; Pauline theology; eschatology; hope; solidarity

## 1. Introduction

Dark times are produced politically but experienced individually. Hannah Arendt's *Men in Dark Times* is explicitly a collection of essays about 'persons—how they lived their lives, how they moved in the world, and how they were affected by historical time.'<sup>1</sup> However, as Katherine Arens makes clear, the essays in that collection also address, and provide constructive proposals for, the politics of a particular historical time.<sup>2</sup> Each portrait provides the reader with glimpses of the possibilities for hope, for 'singing, even in dark times', through a clear-eyed account of one person's experience of the darkness and witness to light. The dark times of Arendt's essays are, of course, those of the first half of the twentieth century, but she is clear that the darkness that emerged in those decades is neither new nor unique. The same can be said of the possibility of the witness to hope. By including an opening and foundational essay on Gotthold Ephraim Lessing at the start of the collection, Arendt treats someone from a different generation 'as though he were a contemporary.'<sup>3</sup> This is to suggest an enduring potential for dark times and resistance to them, extending through history and time, across culture, political arrangements and circumstances: '[d]ark times . . . are not only not new, they are no rarity in history'. In turn, illumination will likely come not from the centre, but the margins, 'less from theories and concepts than from the uncertain, flickering, and often weak light that some men and women, in their lives and their works, will kindle under almost all circumstances and shed over the time span that was given them on earth.'<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Arendt (1973, vii).

<sup>2</sup> Arens (2016).

<sup>3</sup> Arendt (1973, vii).

<sup>4</sup> Arendt (1973, ix).

In this essay I consider an even earlier autobiographical account of ‘dark times’, the product, no doubt, of a set of hard to reconstruct political and social circumstances but experienced existentially and individually as a threat to life. I attempt to convey the sense of genuine despair that such an experience can produce, and I try to identify the precise location of the possibilities for hope in dark times that are at play in the brief narrative account of the experience which is preserved for us in 2 Corinthians 1:8–11. The setting is the world of antiquity and the grim realities of religious persecution and/or Roman imprisonment. The person is Paul of Tarsus, apostle to pagans.<sup>5</sup>

## 2. Affliction in Asia: 2 Corinthians 1:8–9

Paul opens the text we know as 2 Corinthians with a benediction, focused on the consolation (*paraklēsis*) that the God and Father of Jesus the Messiah provides to those who are in affliction (*thlipsis*, see 2 Cor 1:3–7).<sup>6</sup> For Paul, the conviction that God comforts those who suffer is a consequence of his understanding of the revelatory nature of the Christ-event. Both suffering and comfort are of and through Christ (see 1:5).<sup>7</sup> This means that suffering and consolation are embedded in Christian existence per se. However, it is clear, even in Paul’s initial formulations, that he considers his own experience to be an example of the suffering–consolation dynamic, to the extent that Paul the apostle mediates comfort to the Corinthians in their suffering (see 1:6).

It comes as no surprise, then, to find that Paul immediately narrates a particular experience of suffering, and the source of comfort that enabled him to endure it.

2 Cor 1:8 We do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. 9 Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death so that we would rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. 10 He who rescued us from so deadly a peril will continue to rescue us; on him we have set our hope that he will rescue us again, 11 as you also join in helping us by your prayers, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many. (NRSV)<sup>8</sup>

In this passage Paul invites the readers’ attention to the significance and meaning of his ‘affliction’ (again *thlipsis*).<sup>9</sup> We can only speculate about the exact scenario to which Paul is referring, and so there is scholarly conjecture aplenty. Here, I identify aspects of the textual data that point to the dynamic interaction between broader social and political factors on the one hand, and Paul’s specific experience on the other. The first thing to note is that Paul refers to an experience ‘in Asia’ (1:8). The majority of commentators are quick to attribute geographical significance to this prepositional clause, suggesting that Paul must be referring to something that happened somewhere other than Ephesus (a city that Paul is happy to mention by name elsewhere, see 1 Cor 15:32; 16:1).<sup>10</sup> In one sense, the term clearly denotes a territory (see Rom 16:5; 1 Cor 16:19), but it is also true that it implies a Roman governmental province. The potential significance here is that provincial governors had sole power of jurisdiction in capital cases (with appeal to the emperor the only available further recourse).<sup>11</sup> This observation

<sup>5</sup> Drawing on the helpful reframing of Paul’s mission in (Fredriksen 2017).

<sup>6</sup> I cannot address here the complex literary-critical question of the possible composite nature of canonical 2 Corinthians, save to say that I am unpersuaded by the arguments in favour of the various partition theories applied to the letter, and think that a plausible and coherent reading of the letter as a whole is possible.

<sup>7</sup> See my discussion in (Winter 2019).

<sup>8</sup> In what follows, I often use my own translation rather than the NRSV to help convey some of the interpretative decisions that I have made, or to communicate the ambiguity of some of Paul’s wording. Where the NRSV is explicitly followed, this is noted.

<sup>9</sup> Paul’s lack of concrete identification of the experience suggests that the Corinthians were aware of his situation. This means, in turn, that the phrase ‘we do not want you to be unaware *agnoein*’ is not addressing potential ignorance, but potential disregard or minimizing of the significance of that experience.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, (Harris 2005, p. 164).

<sup>11</sup> For a summary of the possible scenario see (Schellenberg 2018, pp. 541–45).

provides us with an entry point into the long standing debate about the nature and source of Paul's affliction. Detailed surveys of the options are already available and so there is no need to review the literature in detail here.<sup>12</sup> Suffice it to say that opinions differ as to whether Paul's suffering was the result of some personal limitation (such as illness) or due to external causes (local opposition to his preaching, of the kind described in Acts 19:28–40 and alluded to in 1 Cor 15:32).<sup>13</sup> Paul's assessment of the experience ('despairing of life ... receiving a sentence of death') strongly suggests, in my view, the latter possibility.<sup>14</sup> Although there is some question about whether the key term *apokrima* used in 1:9 refers to a judicial sentence, the overall tenor of Paul's language, along with a number of parallels between this passage and Philippians 1:18–26 strongly support the idea that the 'affliction in Asia' equated to Paul being arrested, imprisoned, tried and awaiting sentence by the proconsular governor in Asia. The provenance of Philippians is a matter of considerable debate among scholars, but Paul clearly writes that letter from prison (see the earlier references to 'chains' as a metonym for 'imprisonment', so the NRSV, in Phil 1:7, 13), perhaps awaiting a capital trial. For a number of reasons I am persuaded by arguments in support of a conjectured Ephesian imprisonment.<sup>15</sup> The exact circumstances are lost to us, and obviously Paul was eventually released, but it is highly likely that it was this early encounter with Roman judicial procedures, a Roman prison, and the possibility of imminent death, that precipitates Paul's language in 2 Cor 1:8–11.

That language is notable for its sense of despair and devastation. In 1:8 the preposition *huper* appears twice in succession, conveying Paul's lack of agency and control in the circumstances: 'we were burdened utterly, beyond our capacity'. The verb used to describe the experience (*bareō*) conveys a sense of external pressure or burden that generates emotional and psychological stress.<sup>16</sup> Paul uses the verb later in the letter to connote the 'burden' of life in the flesh, a mortality for which he seeks some fundamental transformation (2 Cor 5:4). The result was 'an intensity of doubt best described as despair', using a verb (*exaporeō*) that is elsewhere used to describe the devastation of a defeated army.<sup>17</sup> The extent of that despair is conveyed with the explanatory phrase 'of life itself' (*kai tou zēn*). The outward judicial factors that had brought Paul to this point clearly generated an inward recognition of the serious possibility of death.<sup>18</sup> Verse 10 reinforces this impression with language that conveys 'immense and mortal peril' (*ek pēlikoutōn thanatōn*) that faced Paul.<sup>19</sup>

None of this is certain, of course. Paul's 'memory' of what happened in Asia is retrospective, interpretative, and configured to suit the wider rhetorical argumentation of 2 Corinthians. What is clear is that this configuration is intended to convey the desperation of an individual in the light

<sup>12</sup> For example (Yates 1981; Harris 2005, pp. 164–82).

<sup>13</sup> The reference to 'fighting wild beasts' in 1 Cor 15:32 is now regarded as necessarily metaphorical, rather than literal.

<sup>14</sup> The proposal, set out at length by (Harris 2005, pp. 170–72), that Paul here refers to debilitating or life-threatening illness depends to a large degree on an assumed connection between this verse and 2 Cor 12:2, 7 as well as Gal 4:13. However, there is no real evidence to suggest that these texts refer to the same infirmity, and the hypothesis that Paul ceased preaching in Troas 2 Cor 2:12–13 because of a third occurrence of this illness goes against the explicit rationale provided in the text 'because I did not find my brother Titus'.

<sup>15</sup> This hypothesis, stated here in embryonic form, will be defended at greater length in a forthcoming article, taking issue not least with (Hemer 1972). The case for an Ephesian imprisonment is set out most clearly, although too specifically, by (Duncan 1930). The parallels between Phil 1:18–26 and 2 Cor 1:8–11 are set out clearly by (Furnish 1984, p. 123). The usual argument against the identification is that Philippians seems to offer a positive outlook on Paul's imprisonment, in contrast to the despair of 2 Cor. It is entirely possible, however, that Phil 1:23 implies Paul's contemplation of suicide, see (Holloway 2017, pp. 97–98).

<sup>16</sup> BDAG, 166.

<sup>17</sup> Furnish (1984, p. 113). See Polybius, *Histories*, 3.47.9; Diodorus Siculus, *History* 21.1.4 and also Psalms 77.16 LXX connoting the despair produced by humiliation and divine abandonment. In 2 Cor 4:8, Paul will declare that while he and others may become 'perplexed' *aporeō* he is not 'driven to despair' *exaporeō*, the same verb as 1:8 suggesting the decisive importance of what happened in Asia for Paul's self-understanding. See the extended argument in (Harvey 1996).

<sup>18</sup> The precise nuances of the Greek expressions here are subject to debate and cannot be treated here in any detail. My own view is that the 'sentence of death' is a reference to the possibility of a judicial, capital sentence, perhaps leading Paul to contemplate suicide he refers here to receiving that sentence 'in our selves'.

<sup>19</sup> Thrall (1994, p. 119), who also provides a good summary of the textual problems in 1:10. With her, I regard the plural 'deadly mortal dangers' to be the more likely original reading.

of circumstances over which they feel (or felt at the time) they have no control. It is a 'rhetoric of desperation', and so, of darkness.<sup>20</sup> A Roman prison was designed (although 'design' is far too deliberate a term) to evoke such helplessness in the face of imperial power. Ancient sources bear consistent witness to the physical privations of imprisonment, but also are clear about the emotional and psychological impact of prolonged incarceration. On the basis of Luke's portrayal of Paul under 'house arrest' in Acts 28:16, 30 and the strong likelihood that any imprisonment that Paul faced would very likely have been a practical arrangement as he awaited trial, one might imagine a relatively benign situation. However, Seneca envisaged imprisonment as a punishment worse than public disgrace or exile.<sup>21</sup> If we consider Paul's reference to 'chains' in Philippians (1:7, 13–14, 17) to be something more than just synecdoche for imprisonment then we should envisage physical suffering and humiliation.<sup>22</sup> If Paul contemplated suicide, as prisoners frequently did, then the despair and shame caused by the circumstances of prison are likely to have been factors.<sup>23</sup>

It is instructive to compare Paul's account of his experience with advice given by Epictetus in Book 1 of his *Discourses*. Considering the question 'how should we struggle against difficulties?', Epictetus chastises those who meet adversity with cowardice.<sup>24</sup> In line with advice throughout the *Discourses*, he encourages appropriate discernment of those things that deserve attention and to the capacity to choose to give priority to inward disposition and reason over external circumstances. The exhortation is to 'do nothing as one burdened, or afflicted, or thinking that he is in a wretched plight'.<sup>25</sup> The similarity to Paul's word choice is noticeable: the key terms 'burdened' (*bareō*) and 'afflicted' (*thlipsis*, *thlibō*) occur in both texts. However, the point is that in 2 Cor 1:8–9 Paul is describing a situation in which his capacity for rational choice, or even stoic resignation, is severely diminished. A. E. Harvey, although disagreeing with me about the precise circumstances to which Paul obliquely refers, sums up the extremity of the situation as Paul now describes it for his audience:

In a moment of such darkness the consolations of philosophy, the theory of divine chastisement or the testing and refining of the spirit through suffering are hopelessly inadequate. The sufferer longs to find some meaning in a human condition which philosophical and religious thinkers could only treat as negative, as an affliction to be surmounted through self-discipline or accepted with resignation.<sup>26</sup>

None of this equates directly to the 'dark times' of the early twentieth or twenty-first centuries.<sup>27</sup> However, the motifs of institutional, sanctioned brutality, incarceration, powerlessness, shame, loss of agency, and the onset of despair combine in this text to evoke a form of hopelessness that comes at the limits of human experience. Dark times consist, among other things, of extensive, intensified and collective forms of such experience which in turn provoke a quest for new sources of hope.

### 3. 'He Will Rescue Us Again': 2 Corinthians 1:9–11

In Paul's account of his affliction in Asia, this hope arrived in two forms. The first is described in language that draws on the resources of Paul's own religious tradition, which serve to orient him to an alternative account of the significance of his current circumstances. The conviction that the God of

<sup>20</sup> See (Fowler 1987), a reference I owe to (Oropeza 2016, p. 83).

<sup>21</sup> Seneca, *De Ira* 1.16.2–3.

<sup>22</sup> See (Wansink 1996, pp. 46–48), and the primary references in n.71.

<sup>23</sup> Wansink (1996, pp. 58–61) and see pp. 98–125 on Paul's contemplation of suicide. In addition see (Droge 1988; Holloway 2018). It is possible that Paul's language of 'choosing' *haireō* death in Phil 1:22 is rhetorical rather than real, as argued by (Croy 2003), but the rhetoric only has bite if the deliberation being portrayed has the ring of truth.

<sup>24</sup> Epictetus, *Diatr.* 1.24.1–10, contrasting such cowardice with the example of Diogenes' stoicism.

<sup>25</sup> Epictetus, *Diatr.* 1.25.17.

<sup>26</sup> Harvey (1996, pp. 29–30). The sentence that follows is, however, hyperbolic: 'This episode in Paul's life had been such as to force him to press the question of suffering beyond any point that had been reached, I believe, by the most reflective of his contemporaries.'

<sup>27</sup> For explorations of contemporary configurations of dark times see (Benhabib 2010).

Israel is the 'God who raises the dead' (1:9b) is found in the second benediction of the *Shemoneh Esreh*, the liturgical form of which was probably fixed by the end of the first century CE but which contains earlier material.

*You are powerful  
humbling the proud,  
Strong and judging the violent;  
Alive forever, raising the dead;  
Making wind blow and dew fall;  
Sustaining the living,  
Reviving the dead.  
Like the fluttering of an eye,  
Make our salvation sprout.  
Blessed are you Lord,  
reviving the dead.*<sup>28</sup>

For Paul, this conviction about the identity of Israel's God (one that he undoubtedly shared as a Pharisaic Jew) is now refracted through the prism of his encounter with the risen Christ. It is the resurrection of Jesus, and Paul's own revelatory encounter with the risen Christ, that determine the reality, scope, and significance of the claim that his confidence is in 'the God who raises the dead' (1:9). As the opening benediction in the letter makes clear, it is only 'in Christ' that such consolation is made available to those facing affliction (2 Cor 1:6). The resurrection confirms the identity of Paul's God as the 'dead-raiser'.<sup>29</sup> Paul describes his experience of God's action as that of 'rescue'. The verb *ruomai* is used elsewhere to denote God's saving deliverance from eschatological wrath or the dominion of death (1 Thess 1:10; cf. Rom 7:24; Col 1:13) in the Christ-event and so beautifully straddles the two themes of salvation through the resurrection of Christ, on the one hand, and salvation from various forms of this worldly-affliction, on the other. When Paul, in Philippians 1:19 cites Job 13:16 in the phrase 'this will turn out for my deliverance/salvation (*sōtēria*)' he is probably in the same circumstances, exploring the same ambiguity. The language here in 2 Corinthians, however, seems to be drawn from another scriptural source:

Pangs of death encompassed me;  
hazards of Hades found me;  
affliction and grief (*thlipsis kai odunē*) I found.  
And on the name of the Lord I called:  
'Ah Lord, rescue my soul!' (*rusai tēn psuchēn mou*) . . .  
... Return, O my soul, to your rest,  
because the Lord acted as your benefactor,  
because he delivered my soul from death (*exeilato tēn psuchēn mou*),  
my eyes from tears,  
my feet from slipping. (Psalm 114.3–4, 7–8 LXX)<sup>30</sup>

If we bear in mind the depth of his stated despair, it is clear that this act of divine deliverance became, for Paul, the only source of hope. Again, while the details elude us, Paul narrates the experience in order to convey the idea that whatever happened that led to him being released from prison alive was in fact the work of God, and so, constituted salvation, rescue, resurrection.

<sup>28</sup> Translation from the Cairo Geniza fragments of the Eighteen Benedictions in (Instone-Brewer 2003, here p. 29).

<sup>29</sup> The relationship between the resurrection of Jesus and Paul's experience of being 'raised' in the midst of his Asian affliction is reflected in the textual history of verse 9. At some stage a scribe altered the likely original present participle *egeironti* to the aorist *egeiranti*, making the connection to the past resurrection of Jesus explicit.

<sup>30</sup> Translation from (Pietersma and Wright 2007). English Bible translations based on the Masoretic text list this as Psalm 116.



Paul states that this God ‘will go on rescuing’ and that this becomes the basis for continued hope (‘on him we hope, that he will rescue us again’). There are textual difficulties in verse 10 which point to scribal attempts to clarify Paul’s ambiguous reference to a plurality of ‘deaths’ and the repeated mention of future ‘deliverance’.<sup>31</sup> The three-fold use of the verb ‘deliver’ (*ruomai*) creates ‘an imposing aural effect’ evoking the consistency of divine deliverance, a claim grounded in Paul’s identification of God as ‘the one who raises the dead’.<sup>32</sup> In contrast to those interpretations of this verse that move swiftly from Paul’s memory of a (judicial, political) deliverance in Asia to his anticipation of a more general spiritual and eternal rescue, it makes more sense to retain the ambiguity of the Asian experience as the central resource for hope in expectation of repeated experiences of despair and the threat of death.<sup>33</sup> Paul later refers to experiences of being ‘many times close to death’ (2 Cor 11:23) indicating that there and here he is referring to intense experiences of danger, peril, or affliction that bring the real possibility of death into view. Murray Harris points to Luke’s account of Paul’s shipwreck in Acts 27 as another example of such an experience.<sup>34</sup> For Paul, and for his Corinthian audience, such afflictions can be met by hope because the God who raised Jesus from the dead will deliver the afflicted. This confidence, a form of apocalyptic conviction that was undoubtedly nurtured by Paul’s faith in the God of Israel and then forged into specific shape through his encounter with Christ and experiences as an apostle, is now offered to his readers as the central resource for hope in dark times.

It is likely that Paul’s deliverance from death in Asia was the product of some kind of judicial reprieve or change in political circumstances. One commentator offers the suggestion that the murder of Silanus, direct descendant of Augustus and proconsul of Asia in 55 CE, precipitated the kind of political uncertainty that could have led to the release of prisoners awaiting a capital sentence.<sup>35</sup> As Paul contemplates future afflictions and deliverance, he does not direct his readers’ attention to ongoing possibilities of political instability or favour. Instead, he locates hope in the solidarity that the Corinthians will continue to demonstrate, accompanying Paul’s faith in the God who ‘will rescue us again.’

The ambiguity of the opening of verse 11 has long puzzled interpreters. Is Paul speaking about the Corinthians ‘helping by joining together’ with each other, with Paul, or with God? The grammar of the verse suggests initially that the prayers of the Corinthians somehow align with the divine purpose. However, its rhetorical force, not least at the opening of a letter in which Paul’s apostolic ministry, marked by affliction, weakness and powerlessness, is under suspicion, lies in the idea that prayers of the Corinthians demonstrate their solidarity with Paul. By speaking of the ‘gift’ (charisma) that comes to the afflicted through such solidarity, Paul again uses language that elides the gap between the theological (gift as divine grace) and political (gift as continued rescue from imprisonment and the threat of death) senses of the term. The verse seems to suggest that there is a potential universality to such forms of solidarity: ‘you join in through your prayers . . . so that many (others) will give thanks for us, for the favour/blessing that is given to us through many people.’<sup>36</sup>

Both convictions—about God’s power to deliver and the capacity of others to identify with and intercede for the afflicted—make it possible for Paul to speak about hope. They are specific articulations of the central claims of Paul’s theology as a whole, in 2 Corinthians and his other letters. The resurrection of Jesus, Israel’s Messiah, from death by crucifixion demonstrates God’s fully loving intention to rescue creation from the powers of sin and death, reveals the nature of God’s justice, and inaugurates a new creation that comes into being in the midst of the dark realities of the old.

<sup>31</sup> For a detailed discussion of the text critical issues see (Thrall 1994, pp. 120–22).

<sup>32</sup> See (Barnett 1997, p. 88). The verb *ruomai* overlaps in meaning with *sōzō* in that both terms can refer to ‘rescue’ from hostile or threatening circumstances, but the latter verb is Paul’s preferred term for post-mortem, spiritual salvation. See e.g., 1 Cor 5:5, 10:33.

<sup>33</sup> So (Harris 2005, p. 158).

<sup>34</sup> Harris (2005, p. 159).

<sup>35</sup> See (Carrez 1986, pp. 27–30). The events are recorded by Tacitus, *Annals*, Book 13.

<sup>36</sup> See (Harris 2005, pp. 161–62) for a survey and persuasive summary of Paul’s basic meaning.

Creation is ‘subjected to futility, in hope’ (Rom 8:20), and so, we are saved ‘in hope’ (Rom 8:24). When faced with the reality of death, Paul insists that ‘you may not grieve as others do, as those who have no hope’ (1 Thess 4:13). Those who ‘belong to the day’, even in the midst of apparent darkness, have the ‘hope of salvation’ to wear on their heads (1 Thess 5:5–8). This Pauline optimism is intended to cultivate the kind of hope that discerns the possibilities for new life, and the kinds of communities of solidarity that work to bring it into being.

#### 4. Conclusions

The complicated historical, religious, and political factors that led Paul to find himself (not for the last time) in a Roman prison are a long way from the current complexities that face late-modern societies, with the attendant shadows of ecological crisis and climate anxiety, political populism and white supremacy, capitalist hegemony and human exploitation. The dark times to which scriptural texts bear witness are, at one level, far removed from our own. It remains the case, however, that ancient texts continue to speak with an authoritative voice, as Scripture, in so far as they continue to resource the social imagination of communities’ intent on maintaining hope, whatever the nature of the current context. Paul’s account of his affliction in Asia directs our attention to resources for such hope.

Recent theological work continues to explore the ways in which continued engagement with Paul’s apocalyptic gospel might resource political strategies of engagement, transformation, and resistance.<sup>37</sup> Crucially, this demands a turn to apocalyptic that serves a form of discipleship oriented towards the full reality of life in this world, rather than escape from it, in the anticipation of literal or figurative forms of world destruction. Paul’s apocalyptic imagination and the hope that derives from it compels Paul back into a vocation that makes him consistently susceptible to the forces of darkness and the reality of suffering. ‘We live in the fullness of humanity’, he writes, ‘even though we do not fight our battles according to human criteria’ (2 Cor 10:3).<sup>38</sup> The hardship catalogues of 2 Cor 4:8–9; 6:4–10; 11:23–27 give numerous, and in some cases specifically enumerated, examples of what that entailed. These experiences, this ‘apostolic’ life, bear ongoing testimony to the possibility of hope, predicated on confidence in God’s power to bring life from death, and a shared identity with a community sustained by that faith. In 2 Corinthians 12:1–10, another autobiographical account of a transformative personal experience, Paul narrates an journey to the ‘third heaven’ that culminates in his being given a ‘thorn in the flesh’, a reminder that divine ‘power (*dunamis*) is perfected in weakness (*astheneia*).’ While there are, again, a number of possible explanations about the exact nature of the experience that Paul is describing here, it is clear that the arena in which this ‘revelation’ is to be worked out, is the ongoing commitment to apostolic proclamation and suffering.<sup>39</sup>

Ernst Käsemann, an interpreter of Paul who knew all about hope in dark times, captures the sense in which apocalyptic is integral to responsible discipleship. Noting the propensity to respond to difficult circumstances through piety or anxiety, he insists on the need for the right kind of apocalyptic orientation.

... to construe early Christian apocalyptic merely as the preachment of imminent world ruin is an intolerable mutilation of the evangelical message ... [b]ut where Protestant theology conceives apocalyptic as the message of God’s kingdom revealed in Christ and as the worldwide liberation of the children of God, world anxiety may not be derived from it. A beginning should rather be made with the demons in politics, economics, and the

<sup>37</sup> From the side of Pauline studies, see the recent proposals in (Campbell 2019). From the side of theology consider the arguments in (Kerr 2009).

<sup>38</sup> This translation ‘fullness of humanity ... human criteria’ is an attempt to render the nuance of the double enigmatic phrase ‘according to the flesh’ *kata sarka*.

<sup>39</sup> For a good overview of the possible background and rhetoric of this text, see (Buchanan Wallace 2011). The point made here is strengthened if the ‘ascent’ that Paul makes ultimately is to be judged a failure, ensuring that divine grace is revealed and experiences in the earthly, rather than heavenly, realm. See the arguments in (Gooder 2006).

worldview of the white race in the modern age, with the aim of promoting their expulsion and restraining.<sup>40</sup>

This is a call for expressions of hope that take the shape of embodied resistance and alternative forms of community that bear witness to alternative construals of power and progress. If Paul leaves a legacy for those who seek for hope in dark times, it lies in the confidence that the one who raised the crucified one ‘will rescue us again’, and that by joining together in solidarity we bear witness to the truth of divine grace and its life-giving, transforming power.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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<sup>40</sup> Käsemann (2010, p. 14). For a full-scale exegetical treatment of the relationship between apocalyptic hope and political resistance see (Portier-Young 2011).



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