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# THE SALVIFIC LOGIC OF APOSTOLIC SUFFERING: A SOCIO-RHETORICAL AND EXEGETICAL REASSESSMENT OF 2 CORINTHIANS 11:24 WITHIN PAULINE CRUCIFORM THEOLOGY

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**Abstract**
*This article re-examines 2 Corinthians 11:24 within the broader framework of Pauline cruciform theology, arguing that Paul's reference to receiving "five times the forty lashes minus one" constitutes more than a biographical account of persecution. Through a combination of socio-rhetorical criticism and exegetical analysis, the study investigates how apostolic suffering functions as a theological category within Paul's understanding of ministry, discipleship, and participation in Christ. Situated within the rhetorical context of the Fool's Speech (2 Cor. 11:16–12:10), the verse serves as a strategic element in Paul's defense of apostolic authenticity, challenging prevailing notions of power, honour, and leadership in the ancient Mediterranean world. The article demonstrates that Paul intentionally presents suffering as a visible embodiment of the cruciform pattern established by the death and resurrection of Christ. Rather than viewing affliction as a sign of divine abandonment or ministerial failure, Paul interprets it as participation in Christ's sufferings and as evidence of God's power manifested through human weakness. The study further explores the soteriological implications of this perspective, arguing that apostolic suffering contributes to the proclamation of the gospel and the edification of the believing community without diminishing the uniqueness of Christ's atoning work. By reassessing 2 Corinthians 11:24 through the lens of cruciformity, the article contributes to contemporary Pauline scholarship by illuminating the theological logic that undergirds Paul's understanding of suffering, apostleship, and salvation.*

**Keywords: Theology, Socio-Rhetorical, Soteriology, Apostleship, Christology, Exegesis**

## Introduction

Suffering occupies a central place in Pauline theology and constitutes one of the most distinctive features of Paul's self-understanding as an apostle. Nowhere is this more evident than in 2 Corinthians, where Paul repeatedly presents affliction, weakness, persecution, and hardship as integral dimensions of authentic Christian ministry. In contrast to prevailing Greco-Roman ideals that associated authority with honour, status, and public recognition, Paul constructs an apostolic identity grounded in participation in the sufferings of Christ. Consequently, experiences that would ordinarily signify shame and failure become, in Paul's

theological framework, indicators of divine power and apostolic legitimacy. Recent scholarship has increasingly recognised that the Corinthian correspondence provides a crucial window into Paul's cruciform conception of ministry, particularly his conviction that God's power is manifested through human weakness and suffering.[66]

Within this broader theological framework, 2 Corinthians 11:24 occupies a significant yet often understudied position. Paul's declaration that he received "five times the forty lashes minus one" is frequently interpreted as a biographical reference intended to demonstrate the extent of his hardships. While such readings illuminate the historical realities of Paul's missionary experience, they often fail to explore the theological logic underlying his deliberate inclusion of this suffering catalogue within the so-called Fool's Speech (2 Cor. 11:16–12:10). The verse raises important questions regarding the relationship between suffering, apostolic authority, participation in Christ, and the outworking of God's salvific purposes in Pauline thought.[67]

This article argues that 2 Corinthians 11:24 functions not merely as autobiographical reminiscence but as a theological statement embedded within Paul's cruciform understanding of apostleship. The study contends that apostolic suffering serves a distinct salvific and ecclesial function in Paul's theology, not by supplementing Christ's atoning work, but by embodying and mediating the cruciform pattern through which the gospel is proclaimed and the believing community is strengthened. Paul's sufferings therefore constitute an essential dimension of his apostolic witness and provide insight into his understanding of participation in Christ's redemptive mission.

Methodologically, the article employs an interdisciplinary approach that integrates historical-exegetical analysis with socio-rhetorical criticism and theological interpretation. Exegetical analysis examines the linguistic, literary, and historical dimensions of 2 Corinthians 11:24 within its immediate context. Socio-rhetorical criticism explores how honour, shame, weakness, and suffering function within the social world of the Corinthian correspondence and contribute to Paul's rhetorical defence of his apostleship. Theological interpretation situates the text within the wider contours of Pauline cruciform theology, with particular attention to themes of participation in Christ, apostolic ministry, and salvation. Through this integrated approach, the study seeks to demonstrate that apostolic suffering in 2 Corinthians 11:24 is neither incidental nor merely autobiographical but forms part of a coherent theological vision in which the cross shapes both the identity of the apostle and the life of the church.

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[66] Solomon I. Enobong, Ezichi A. Ituma, and Favour C. Uroko, „Pauline Concept of Ministry in 2 Corinthians 4:1–15 and the Religious Celebrity Syndrome in Nigeria", *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 80, no. 2 (2024): 1–8; Christian D. Cardona and Jones Ted Lauda Woy, „The Thorn in the Flesh: A Pauline View of Suffering in 2 Corinthians 12:7", *Klabat Theological Review* 4, no. 1 (2024): 41–52.

[67] Marcin Kowalski, „Holy War in Corinth: The Apocalyptic Background of Paul"s Struggle against Opponents in 2 Cor 10:3–6", *Religions* 14, no. 5 (2023): 630; Michael M. C. Reardon, „Becoming God: Interpreting Pauline Soteriology as Deification", *Journal of Reformed Theology* 22, no. 1 (2023): 1–24.

## The Rhetorical and Historical Context of 2 Corinthians 11:24

### 1. The Fool's Speech (2 Cor. 11:16–12:10)

Second Corinthians 11:24 occurs within what scholars commonly designate as Paul's "Fool's Speech" (11:16–12:10), a highly sophisticated rhetorical unit in which the apostle ironically adopts the language and conventions of boasting in order to defend his apostolic authority against rival teachers. Faced with opponents who measured legitimacy according to eloquence, spiritual experiences, social status, and outward displays of power, Paul engages in a deliberate rhetorical reversal. Rather than boasting in achievements that would attract honour in the Greco-Roman world, he boasts in sufferings, weaknesses, and humiliations. In doing so, he subverts conventional expectations regarding leadership and authority and redirects attention to the cruciform character of authentic apostleship. Recent studies have emphasized that Paul's rhetoric in 2 Corinthians 11 functions as an exercise in identity construction, distinguishing the true apostle from deceptive claimants through the paradoxical language of weakness and suffering.[68]

The irony of the Fool's Speech lies in Paul's insistence that he is speaking "as a fool" while simultaneously exposing the folly of worldly standards by which the Corinthians had evaluated ministers. The catalogues of hardships in 11:23–33 are therefore not incidental autobiographical digressions but carefully crafted rhetorical evidence demonstrating that apostolic authenticity is inseparable from conformity to the suffering Christ. Paul's sufferings become the very credentials that validate his ministry, thereby transforming what society regarded as shameful into signs of divine approval.[69]

### 2. Jewish Disciplinary Flogging and Its Significance

Within this catalogue of sufferings, Paul states: "Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one" (2 Cor. 11:24). This punishment derives from the provisions of Deuteronomy 25:1–3, where the maximum number of lashes was restricted to forty in order to preserve the offender's dignity. By the Second Temple period, Jewish legal tradition commonly limited the punishment to thirty-nine lashes to avoid accidentally exceeding the prescribed maximum. The penalty was administered within synagogue contexts as a disciplinary measure for serious violations of communal norms and religious obligations.[70]

The significance of Paul's statement extends beyond the physical severity of the punishment. Receiving this penalty on five separate occasions suggests that Paul maintained ongoing engagement with Jewish communities throughout his missionary career. Rather than indicating complete separation from Judaism, the repeated floggings imply that Paul continued to operate within Jewish communal networks where synagogue authorities possessed sufficient jurisdiction to impose disciplinary sanctions. Scholars have therefore argued that 2 Corinthians

[68] Frederick David Carr, „Appearances Can Be Deceiving: Transformation and Identity in 2 Corinthians 11.13–15", *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 47, no. 4 (2025): 531–550.
[69] Dennis C. Duling, „2 Corinthians 11:22: Historical Context, Rhetoric, and Ethnicity", *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 64, no. 2 (2008): 833–847
[70] Markus Oehler, „The Punishment of Thirty-Nine Lashes (2 Corinthians 11:24) and the Place of Paul in Judaism", *Journal of Biblical Literature* 140, no. 3 (2021): 623–640.

11:24 provides important evidence for understanding Paul's complex relationship to Judaism and his persistent commitment to proclaiming Jesus as Messiah among fellow Jews despite recurrent opposition.[71]

Moreover, the repeated nature of these punishments underscores the cost of Paul's missionary vocation. Each flogging represented not only physical pain but also public humiliation and social marginalization. Yet Paul deliberately includes these experiences in his apostolic résumé because they exemplify the self-sacrificial pattern that characterized his ministry.

### 3. Suffering as a Marker of Apostolic Identity

For Paul, suffering is not merely an unfortunate consequence of ministry; it constitutes a defining characteristic of apostolic identity. Throughout 2 Corinthians, he repeatedly links apostolic service with affliction, weakness, persecution, and endurance (cf. 2 Cor. 4:7–12; 6:4–10; 12:9–10). Such experiences are interpreted not as evidence of divine disfavour but as manifestations of participation in the sufferings of Christ. Apostleship is therefore understood in cruciform terms, shaped by the pattern of Christ's death and resurrection.

This understanding stands in sharp contrast to the values of the surrounding Greco-Roman culture, where honour, prestige, and public recognition were commonly regarded as indicators of authority. Paul's repeated floggings, imprisonments, and hardships would ordinarily have disqualified him from public esteem. Yet he intentionally presents these experiences as the very marks of genuine apostleship because they reveal God's power operating through human weakness. The apostle's suffering body becomes a visible testimony to the reality of the gospel he proclaims.[72]

Consequently, 2 Corinthians 11:24 serves as more than a historical recollection of persecution. Within the rhetorical framework of the Fool's Speech and the broader theology of 2 Corinthians, it functions as evidence of Paul's participation in the cruciform life of Christ and as a marker of authentic apostolic vocation. His suffering is neither accidental nor peripheral; it is constitutive of his identity as Christ's apostle and forms an essential component of the theological logic that undergirds his ministry.[73]

**Apostolic Suffering and the Socio-Rhetorical Reversal of Honour**

### a. Honour and Shame in the Ancient Mediterranean World

The social world of the first-century Mediterranean basin was fundamentally structured around the values of honour and shame. Honour functioned as the principal measure of personal worth, social status, and public recognition, while shame represented the loss or absence of

[71] Christoph Stenschke, „Emissary to Jews in the Diaspora and to Some Non-Jews: Paul of Tarsus in the Book of Acts", *New Testament Studies* 70, no. 2 (2024): 180–198.
[72] Solomon I. Enobong, Ezichi A. Ituma, and Favour C. Uroko, „Pauline Concept of Ministry in 2 Corinthians 4:1–15 and the Religious Celebrity Syndrome in Nigeria", *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 80, no. 2 (2024): 1–8.
[73] Frederick David Carr, „Appearances Can Be Deceiving: Transformation and Identity in 2 Corinthians 11.13–15", *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 47, no. 4 (2025): 531–550.

such esteem within the community. Public reputation, patronage networks, rhetorical competence, noble lineage, and visible demonstrations of power were among the primary means by which honour was acquired and maintained. Within this cultural framework, weakness, suffering, and public humiliation were generally interpreted as indicators of social failure and diminished status.[74]

The Corinthian church existed within this honour-conscious environment and appears to have been influenced by prevailing cultural assumptions regarding authority and leadership. Paul's opponents seemingly promoted themselves through displays of rhetorical excellence, spiritual achievements, and claims to superior credentials (2 Cor. 10–12). Consequently, Paul's physical weaknesses, hardships, and sufferings could easily have been perceived as evidence that he lacked divine favour and apostolic legitimacy.[75] The challenge confronting Paul, therefore, was not merely theological but socio-rhetorical: he needed to redefine the standards by which apostolic authority was assessed.

Recent scholarship has increasingly emphasized that Paul's argument in 2 Corinthians constitutes a direct challenge to the dominant honour culture of the Greco-Roman world. Rather than seeking recognition according to conventional social values, Paul develops an alternative framework in which honour is reconfigured through the lens of Christ's crucifixion. The cross, a symbol of public shame and degradation, becomes the decisive paradigm through which Christian identity and leadership are understood.[76]

**b. Boasting in Weakness as a Rhetorical Strategy**

Against this cultural backdrop, Paul's so-called Fool's Speech (2 Cor. 11:16–12:10) emerges as a masterful rhetorical strategy. Employing irony and inversion, Paul temporarily adopts the language of boasting only to subvert its conventional meaning. Whereas his opponents boast in achievements, status, and extraordinary spiritual experiences, Paul boasts in imprisonments, beatings, dangers, hunger, sleeplessness, and other forms of suffering. His catalogue of hardships (11:23–29) intentionally reverses the values of the surrounding culture by presenting weakness as the primary credential of authentic apostleship.[77]

This rhetorical inversion reaches its climax in 2 Corinthians 11:30, where Paul declares, “If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.” Such a statement would have appeared paradoxical, even absurd, within a society where public honour depended upon the projection of strength and success. Yet Paul's rhetoric is grounded in a theological conviction that divine power is most fully revealed through human weakness. The apostle's sufferings are therefore not embarrassing liabilities to be concealed but theological assets that disclose the presence and activity of God.[78]

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[74] David A. deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship and Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022), 23–57.
[75] Nijay K. Gupta, *2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2024), 223–228.
[76] Michael J. Gorman, *Participation: Paul's Vision of Life in Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 247–266.
[77] Benjamin L. White, „Paul's Foolish Boasting and the Reversal of Honor in 2 Corinthians 11–12“, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 46, no. 2 (2023): 165–183.
[78] Gupta, *2 Corinthians*, 234–240.

Scholars have noted that Paul's strategy reflects a deliberate reappropriation of honour. Rather than rejecting honour altogether, he relocates it within a cruciform framework. Honour is no longer derived from social prestige or personal achievement but from faithful participation in the sufferings of Christ. Through this rhetorical move, Paul constructs a distinctly Christian vision of leadership in which weakness becomes the arena of divine empowerment.[79]

### c. Suffering as Apostolic Authentication

Within Paul's argument, suffering functions as a powerful means of apostolic authentication. Unlike his opponents, whose claims to authority rested upon external markers of success, Paul grounds his apostolic legitimacy in his participation in Christ's sufferings. The repeated hardships catalogued in 2 Corinthians 11 are presented not merely as personal experiences but as evidence of a ministry shaped by the cross. Apostolic authenticity is therefore demonstrated through endurance, self-sacrifice, and faithful perseverance in the face of opposition.[80]

This perspective is consistent with Paul's broader theology throughout the Corinthian correspondence. In 2 Corinthians 4:10–12, he describes himself as "always carrying in the body the death of Jesus" so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested. Likewise, in 2 Corinthians 12:9–10, weakness becomes the very context in which Christ's power is perfected. Suffering is thus transformed from a sign of disgrace into a visible manifestation of divine activity. The apostle's body bears witness to the crucified and risen Christ, rendering affliction an essential dimension of his vocational identity.[81]

Furthermore, Paul's understanding of apostolic suffering possesses an ecclesial dimension. His hardships serve not only to authenticate his ministry but also to strengthen the faith of believers. By embodying the cruciform pattern of Christ, the apostle provides a living model of discipleship for the Christian community. Suffering thereby becomes both a mark of apostolic authenticity and a means through which God's salvific purposes are advanced within the church.[82]

Consequently, the socio-rhetorical reversal of honour in 2 Corinthians reveals that Paul's sufferings are neither accidental nor peripheral to his ministry. They constitute the very evidence of his apostolic calling. By boasting in weakness and embracing experiences that the surrounding culture regarded as shameful, Paul redefines honour according to the logic of the cross and presents suffering as the authentic hallmark of apostolic service.

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[79] Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2023), 189–208.

[80] Frederick David Carr, „Appearances Can Be Deceiving: Transformation and Identity in 2 Corinthians 11.13–15", *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 47, no. 4 (2025): 531–550.

[81] Lucy Peppiatt, *The Letter to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2024), 298–307.

[82] Michael F. Bird, *Paul and the Christian Life: Ethical and Missional Implications of Pauline Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2024), 171–183.

## The Cruciform Shape of Pauline Apostleship

### i. Participation in Christ's Sufferings

At the heart of Paul's understanding of apostleship lies the conviction that believers, and especially apostles, participate in the sufferings of Christ. This participation is neither merely ethical imitation nor passive endurance of hardship; rather, it reflects a profound union with Christ through which the believer shares in the pattern of Christ's death and resurrection. Throughout his letters, Paul consistently portrays Christian existence as participation in the Messiah's redemptive story. The apostle's sufferings are therefore interpreted not as isolated experiences but as manifestations of his incorporation into the crucified and risen Christ.[83]

In 2 Corinthians, this theme is particularly prominent. Paul declares that "just as the sufferings of Christ overflow to us, so also through Christ our comfort overflows" (2 Cor. 1:5). Similarly, he describes himself as "always carrying in the body the death of Jesus" so that the life of Jesus may be revealed in him (2 Cor. 4:10–11). Such statements demonstrate that apostolic suffering possesses a profoundly christological character. The apostle's afflictions are understood as participation in the ongoing reality of Christ's sufferings, not in an atoning sense, but in a representative and vocational sense that advances the mission of the gospel.[84]

The reference to receiving thirty-nine lashes on five occasions (2 Cor. 11:24) should therefore be understood within this participatory framework. Paul's repeated experiences of rejection, persecution, and physical suffering reveal the extent to which his ministry conforms to the cruciform pattern established by Christ himself. Apostolic identity is thus inseparable from conformity to the suffering Messiah.[85]

### ii. The Theology of Weakness and Divine Power

A central feature of Pauline cruciform theology is the paradoxical relationship between human weakness and divine power. In the Greco-Roman world, strength, honour, rhetorical skill, and social prestige were widely regarded as indicators of authority and success. Paul, however, radically overturns these assumptions by presenting weakness as the primary arena in which God's power is revealed.[86]

This theological paradox reaches its clearest expression in 2 Corinthians 12:9–10, where Paul recounts Christ's declaration: "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Consequently, Paul embraces weakness, persecution, hardships, and sufferings because they create the conditions through which divine power becomes visible. Weakness is

[83] Michael J. Gorman, *Participation: Paul's Vision of Life in Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 113–146.
[84] Constantine R. Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2024), 389–405
[85] Nijay K. Gupta, *2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2024), 236–241.
[86] Lucy Peppiatt, *The Letter to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2024), 301–307.

not celebrated for its own sake but because it exposes human dependence upon God and allows God's sustaining presence to be manifested more fully.[87]

Recent Pauline scholarship has emphasized that weakness functions as a theological category rather than merely a description of physical or emotional vulnerability. It reflects the pattern of Christ's own self-emptying and humiliation, culminating in the cross. Paul's sufferings therefore reveal the transformative logic of God's kingdom, where apparent defeat becomes the context for divine victory and where vulnerability becomes the medium of God's redemptive activity.[88]

Within this framework, the sufferings listed in 2 Corinthians 11:23–29 become evidence not of apostolic inadequacy but of divine empowerment. Paul's endurance amidst repeated affliction demonstrates that the effectiveness of his ministry depends not upon human strength but upon the sustaining grace of God. Consequently, weakness becomes a theological witness to the power of the crucified and risen Christ.[89]

### iii. The Cross as the Paradigm of Ministry

The theology of participation and weakness ultimately converges in Paul's understanding of the cross as the defining paradigm of ministry. For Paul, the cross is not merely the means of salvation but also the pattern through which Christian existence and apostolic service are shaped. Apostleship is fundamentally cruciform because it reflects the self-giving, sacrificial, and obedient character of Christ's own ministry.[90]

This cruciform paradigm is evident throughout the Corinthian correspondence. In 1 Corinthians 1:18–25, Paul identifies the message of the cross as God's wisdom revealed through what appears to be foolishness and weakness. In 2 Corinthians, this theology is extended to the apostle's own experience. Just as Christ's power was revealed through suffering and apparent defeat, so apostolic ministry is characterized by self-sacrifice, endurance, and faithful service amidst adversity.[91]

The cross therefore functions as both the foundation and the model of apostolic vocation. Paul's willingness to endure repeated flogging, imprisonment, hunger, danger, and persecution reflects his commitment to embodying the gospel he proclaims. His ministry becomes a living enactment of the crucified Christ. Through suffering, the apostle demonstrates that authentic

[87] Michael F. Bird, *Paul and the Christian Life: Ethical and Missional Implications of Pauline Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2024), 174–179.
[88] Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2023), 215–237.
[89] Matthew R. Malcolm, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reversal: Reframing Weakness in 2 Corinthians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 142–161.
[90] Susan Grove Eastman, *Paul and the Person: Reframing Paul's Anthropology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2024), 188–201.
[91] Michael F. Bird and Nijay K. Gupta, *The Apostle Paul and His Letters: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2025), 321–327.

leadership is not defined by domination, prestige, or self-promotion but by sacrificial service for the sake of others.[92]

Consequently, the cruciform shape of Pauline apostleship provides the theological framework for understanding 2 Corinthians 11:24. The verse is not simply a record of historical suffering but a testimony to the apostle's participation in Christ's sufferings, his embodiment of divine power through weakness, and his commitment to a ministry patterned after the cross. Paul's afflictions reveal that genuine apostleship is fundamentally cruciform, rooted in the paradoxical wisdom of God disclosed through the suffering and exaltation of Jesus Christ.

## The Salvific Logic of Apostolic Suffering

### 1. Suffering and Gospel Proclamation

A central feature of Paul's theology of suffering is its inseparable connection to the proclamation of the gospel. For Paul, apostolic suffering is not an unfortunate by-product of ministry but an integral component of the apostolic vocation through which the message of Christ is advanced. Throughout his letters, suffering functions as a visible demonstration of the gospel's transformative power, revealing the authenticity of the messenger and the reality of the message proclaimed. Consequently, affliction assumes a missional significance that extends beyond the personal experiences of the apostle.

In 2 Corinthians, Paul repeatedly links suffering with the advancement of the gospel. His afflictions are interpreted as evidence of faithful participation in God's mission rather than indicators of divine displeasure. The hardships catalogued in 2 Corinthians 11:23–29, including the five Jewish floggings mentioned in verse 24, illustrate the cost of sustained commitment to proclaiming Christ across diverse and often hostile contexts. Rather than deterring his missionary efforts, these sufferings testify to the depth of his dedication to the gospel entrusted to him.[93]

This relationship between suffering and proclamation reflects the broader Pauline conviction that the message of the cross is itself characterized by paradox. Just as God's saving work was accomplished through the apparent weakness and shame of Christ's crucifixion, so the gospel continues to be communicated through the weakness of its human messengers. Paul's sufferings therefore embody the very message he proclaims. The apostle becomes a living witness to the cruciform pattern of God's redemptive activity, demonstrating that divine power is revealed through human vulnerability.[94]

Moreover, Paul's endurance amidst persecution contributes to the credibility of his apostolic witness. His willingness to suffer for the gospel confirms the sincerity of his convictions and provides tangible evidence of his commitment to Christ. In this sense, suffering serves an

[92] Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 241–252.

[93] Nijay K. Gupta, *2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2024), 236–242.
[94] Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2023), 221–239.

apologetic as well as a missional function, validating the message through the sacrificial fidelity of the messenger.[95]

### 2. Suffering and Ecclesial Edification

Beyond its role in gospel proclamation, apostolic suffering also serves the spiritual formation and strengthening of the church. Paul consistently understands his afflictions as having corporate significance for the believing community. His sufferings are not merely personal experiences but are endured for the benefit of others, particularly the churches entrusted to his pastoral care.[96]

This perspective is clearly articulated in 2 Corinthians 1:3–7, where Paul explains that the comfort he receives from God amid suffering enables him to comfort others experiencing similar trials. Apostolic suffering thus becomes a means through which divine grace is mediated to the community of faith. The apostle's endurance provides encouragement, instruction, and reassurance to believers facing opposition and hardship.[97]

The ecclesial dimension of suffering is further evident in Paul's understanding of ministry as self-giving service. In 2 Corinthians 4:12, he writes, "So death is at work in us, but life in you." This statement encapsulates a fundamental principle of Pauline ministry: apostolic sacrifice contributes to the spiritual flourishing of the church. While Christ alone accomplishes redemption through his atoning death, the apostle's sufferings participate in the ongoing dissemination and embodiment of that redemptive reality within the life of the Christian community.[98]

Consequently, Paul's reference to repeated floggings in 2 Corinthians 11:24 should be understood not merely as evidence of personal endurance but as an expression of pastoral commitment. The hardships he endures are borne in service to the churches and contribute to their spiritual growth, perseverance, and maturity in Christ. Apostolic suffering therefore possesses an inherently ecclesial orientation, directed toward the building up of the body of Christ.[99]

### 3. Apostolic Participation in God's Salvific Purposes

The relationship between suffering, proclamation, and ecclesial edification ultimately points to a broader theological reality: apostolic participation in God's salvific purposes. Paul does not regard his sufferings as possessing independent redemptive efficacy, nor does he suggest that

[95] Matthew R. Malcolm, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reversal: Reframing Weakness in 2 Corinthians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 163–181.
[96] Michael F. Bird, *Paul and the Christian Life: Ethical and Missional Implications of Pauline Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2024), 179–185.
[97] Lucy Peppiatt, *The Letter to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2024), 71–79.
[98] Constantine R. Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2024), 392–399.
[99] Susan Grove Eastman, *Paul and the Person: Reframing Paul's Anthropology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2024), 205–211.

they supplement the once-for-all atoning work of Christ. Nevertheless, he understands apostolic suffering as a means through which God's saving purposes are advanced in history.[100]

This participatory dimension emerges from Paul's theology of union with Christ. Because the apostle is united with the crucified and risen Lord, his ministry reflects the pattern of Christ's own self-giving mission. Through suffering, Paul participates in God's ongoing work of reconciliation, evangelization, and ecclesial formation. His afflictions become instruments through which the message of salvation reaches new communities and through which existing believers are strengthened in faith.[101]

The salvific logic of apostolic suffering is therefore grounded in the paradox of the cross. Just as God brought salvation to humanity through the suffering and death of Christ, so the apostolic ministry that bears witness to this salvation is likewise marked by suffering. The apostle's afflictions do not create salvation but serve the proclamation, embodiment, and extension of God's saving work. Suffering becomes a medium through which the cruciform character of the gospel is displayed before both the church and the world.[102]

From this perspective, 2 Corinthians 11:24 acquires profound theological significance. The repeated lashes endured by Paul are not merely historical memories of persecution but expressions of a deeper participation in God's redemptive mission. They reveal an apostle whose life has been shaped by the cross and whose sufferings contribute to the communication and embodiment of the gospel. Thus, apostolic suffering functions within a salvific framework not as an additional source of redemption, but as a divinely appointed means through which the benefits of Christ's redemptive work are proclaimed, appropriated, and experienced within the life of the church.

## Conclusion

The present study has reassessed 2 Corinthians 11:24 within the broader framework of Pauline cruciform theology, arguing that Paul's reference to receiving “five times the forty lashes minus one” functions as far more than a biographical recollection of persecution. Through a socio-rhetorical and exegetical investigation, the article has demonstrated that this verse occupies a significant place within Paul's defence of his apostolic ministry and reflects a coherent theological understanding of suffering as an essential component of apostolic identity. Situated within the rhetorical context of the Fool's Speech (2 Cor. 11:16–12:10), the account of repeated floggings serves as evidence of Paul's participation in the sufferings of Christ and his commitment to a ministry shaped by the paradoxical logic of the cross.

The study has shown that Paul's presentation of suffering must be interpreted against the backdrop of the honour-shame culture of the ancient Mediterranean world. Whereas public punishment, weakness, and humiliation were conventionally regarded as signs of social

[100] Michael J. Gorman, *Participation: Paul's Vision of Life in Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 287–304.
[101] Michael F. Bird and Nijay K. Gupta, *The Apostle Paul and His Letters: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2025), 327–333.
[102] David I. Starling, *Paul and the Resilience of the Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2024), 143–157.

disgrace and diminished authority, Paul deliberately transforms these experiences into indicators of apostolic authenticity. By boasting in weakness rather than achievement, he challenges prevailing cultural assumptions regarding leadership and redefines honour according to the pattern of Christ's crucifixion. Consequently, suffering emerges not as a contradiction of apostolic calling but as one of its most visible manifestations.[103]

Furthermore, the article has demonstrated that Paul's understanding of suffering is inseparable from his theology of participation in Christ. Apostolic affliction reflects conformity to the crucified Messiah and reveals the ongoing manifestation of God's power through human weakness. The repeated lashes described in 2 Corinthians 11:24 therefore function as tangible expressions of a cruciform vocation in which the apostle embodies the message he proclaims. This participatory dimension highlights the intimate relationship between Christology and apostleship in Pauline thought, where ministry is shaped by the death and resurrection of Christ and sustained by divine grace.[104]

A major contribution of this study lies in its articulation of the salvific logic underlying apostolic suffering. While Paul's sufferings possess no atoning efficacy and do not supplement the unique redemptive work accomplished by Christ, they nevertheless participate in God's saving purposes through the proclamation of the gospel and the edification of the church. Apostolic suffering serves the advancement of the gospel, strengthens believing communities, and embodies the transformative reality of the cross. In this sense, Paul's afflictions function as instruments through which God's salvific activity becomes visible within the life of the church and the wider world.[105]

The study also contributes to contemporary Pauline scholarship by bringing socio-rhetorical analysis into constructive dialogue with theological interpretation. Recent discussions of Pauline suffering have often focused either on historical reconstruction or on theological abstraction. By integrating these approaches, the article demonstrates that the rhetorical, social, and theological dimensions of 2 Corinthians 11:24 are mutually illuminating. Such an approach offers a more comprehensive understanding of Paul's theology of suffering and highlights the importance of reading individual texts within the broader narrative and theological structures of the Pauline corpus.[106]

Theologically, the findings underscore the centrality of the cross as the defining paradigm of Christian ministry and apostleship. Paul's experience challenges interpretations of leadership that prioritize success, prestige, influence, or visible power. Instead, authentic apostolic

[103] David A. deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship and Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022), 31–58; Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2023), 215–239.
[104] Constantine R. Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2024), 389–405; Lucy Peppiatt, *The Letter to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2024), 301–307.
[105] Michael F. Bird, *Paul and the Christian Life: Ethical and Missional Implications of Pauline Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2024), 179–185; David I. Starling, *Paul and the Resilience of the Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2024), 143–157.
[106] Nijay K. Gupta, *2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2024), 236–242; Matthew R. Malcolm, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reversal: Reframing Weakness in 2 Corinthians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 163–181.

ministry is characterized by self-giving service, faithful endurance, and participation in Christ's sufferings. The cross remains the interpretive key through which suffering, weakness, and divine power are understood. Accordingly, 2 Corinthians 11:24 invites contemporary readers to reconsider the nature of Christian vocation and to recognize that suffering, when endured in union with Christ and in service to the gospel, may function as a profound expression of faithfulness rather than failure.[107]

In conclusion, Paul's reference to receiving five Jewish floggings stands as a powerful testimony to the cruciform character of apostleship. It reveals an apostle whose identity, ministry, and mission were shaped by participation in the suffering Messiah. Through this lens, 2 Corinthians 11:24 emerges not merely as a historical note concerning persecution but as a theological witness to the paradoxical wisdom of God, whereby weakness becomes the arena of divine power, suffering becomes a means of gospel witness, and apostolic ministry becomes a living embodiment of the cross of Christ.

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[107] Michael J. Gorman, *Participation: Paul's Vision of Life in Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 287–304; Michael F. Bird and Nijay K. Gupta, *The Apostle Paul and His Letters: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2025), 327–333.

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