

Rejoice In The Face Of Suffering: A Reading Of Romans 5:3-5 On Covid-19 In Africa

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Abstract

This paper will approach the situation of COVID-19 from Romans 5:3-5 where Paul proposes suffering with “rejoicing” as a sense of humour. The world is experiencing one of the worst pandemics in its history, known as the novel Corona Virus (COVID-19). The question this paper seeks to address is: what is the role of humour from Roman 5:3-5 in a trying time like COVID-19? With the number of infections on the increase every day in most European and African countries, without any cure yet, the effect of the pandemic on humans, the economy, society, and family life is severe and making life difficult. The impact includes deaths, fear, anxiety, confusion, hunger, business closure, people losing their jobs; some are discouraged while others are encouraged through their faith. COVID-19 came with its slogan “stay at home” even when the poor masses that cannot afford one square meal a day or buy food for survival are suffering. This pandemic has created more suffering than expected on people, animals, and the environment. This study will analyse how rejoicing can serve as a sense of humour through a contextual reading of Romans 5:3-5 in line with the COVID-19 pandemic, especially from an African perspective. Even though there is no cure yet, this paper will propose the role of “rejoicing” that serves as a sense of humour in facing the reality of suffering that COVID has brought on people especially in the African continent.

Keywords: Romans, Covid, Rejoice Suffering

Introduction

Suffering is a normal phenomenon of human experience throughout history. Accepting suffering as part and parcel of human life and experiences has become a significant challenge to humanity. There has been a constant tussle at responding to the natural human questions: why? Why do humans suffer? What is the purpose, if any, of suffering, especially when it happens to virtually all human beings? It is from these backdrop questions that this study will consider such a situation of suffering from Romans 5:3-5 and how Paul approached his situation through “rejoicing” that served as a sense of humour because he knew he had no power to control some of the cases. Paul in writing the letter of Romans shared some of the suffering he went through as a human being and also a follower of Christ. Suffering for Paul seems to be the reality of life that a human being cannot escape as long as one is still alive.

A similar situation is seen with the outbreak of COVID-19 in December 2019 in China that has spread to virtually every part of the globe. Life is becoming more difficult and challenging due to the novel Corona Virus. The more the world powers are trying to solve the problem, the more the number of cases is increasing daily. The number of deaths is also rising, people are losing their jobs, and family life is becoming more challenging economically which seems to also increase the number of Gender-Based violence in the world. The virus has caused more havoc than good, both to the world’s powerful countries as well as the less developed countries, especially Africa, even as relatively low compared to that of the West. But the bigger challenge is that there is no cure for the pandemic yet. Health workers are trying their best to control and contain the spread of the virus. Now the question is: whether Christians can approach this pandemic with the reality of suffering that is on the increasing daily.

This paper has majorly considered Paul’s character and how his act of “rejoicing” serves as a sense of humour that plays a role in giving him comfort when he is faced with suffering and difficult situations just like the world is facing in the 21st Century through COVID-19. Using ‘rejoicing’ as a sense of humour to give hope to the Christians in efforts to containing it and leaving it to God, i.e., having a positive sense of humour in facing the reality of life and not overspiritualizing some situations that are not spiritual, especially in circumstances like COVID-19.

Suffering and Humour

Fundamental to human existence is the experience of suffering in various degrees, which is a puzzle with mysterious and grief-causing effects on humanity, not minding one's age, gender, religion or social status. The etymology of the word "suffering" is derived from "sub" (under), and "ferre" (to bear), which means to "bear under something" that is severe and painful in most cases (James 2012:xv). Even though this topic has received scholars' attention at various levels, it continues to be a topic too difficult to define due to its changing nature. Suffering can be witnessed in epic proportions, just like in the phenomena of the African slave trade, pandemics, insecurities in most countries, wars, natural disaster among others. Suffering can be in form of health challenges, emotional and spiritual crises, among others. Christophe Rogier *et al* (2003) discussed suffering from clinical aspects of black-water fever among African children suffering from frequent malaria attacks, which is another way in which people within the continent of Africa are suffering. Magidson *et al* (2019) also viewed suffering within the African continent in terms of people living with health challenges due to lack of proper medical facilities in taking care of patients living with HIV and subsequent stigmatization and discrimination).

Furthermore, Naomi Bock, *et al* (2018) in their work: "*The role of attachment to God and spiritual self-awareness in predicting evangelical Christians' appraisals of suffering*" approached the reality of suffering from the response of the evangelical Christians and how it can help their spiritual life. They further examined how attachment to God and spiritual self-awareness are related to evangelical Christians' appraisal of suffering. Specifically, they were interested in whether attachment to anxiety and attachment avoidance with God were related to the appraised meaning of stressful life experiences as transformational and whether spiritual self-awareness mediated this relationship.

Many researchers have explored the concepts of suffering from religious perspectives on how God is suited to be a symbolic attachment figure whenever people are suffering. When faced with distress or challenges, individuals' attachment styles have been shown to influence the types of strategies they use to regulate their emotions (Olayide Ogunsiyi *et al*, 2010; Turaki Yusuf, 2002; John Janzen, 2011; Mikael Lundmark, 2016; Amadi Chibuike *et al* 2017). Researchers have also empirically demonstrated how individuals' perceived relationship with God can serve all the same functions (that is a safe haven, secure base) as human attachment relationships despite the fact that God is not visible or physically accessible (Olayide

Ogunsiji, 2010; Idowu 1973:139; Kanu, Ikechukwu Anthony, 2014:8). However, Olayide (2010) only considered the intimate partner violence (IPV) and the suffering they are going through especially the women in West African countries. More so, Kelvin Onongha (2013) in his article “*Suffering, salvation, and the sovereignty of God: Towards a theology of suffering*”, discussed how Christians are to handle crisis such as suffering that reveals much about their commitment, conviction, and allegiance to the Saviour. Remaining firm in the face of suffering shows how a believer is committed to his/her Christian faith.

Nevertheless, even in the face of suffering there is need for humour especially when people have nothing to do to change situation they did not cause. Humour is intrinsically in human beings depending on the way and manner an individual approaches it. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* (2011) defines humour as the condition of being amusing or comic, and as less intellectual and more sympathetic than witty. Expressions of humour are found in both literature and speech, humour seen as the ability to perceive or express laughter or to take a joke, or as a mood or state of mind. Robert (1990) in his work “sense of humour as a Christian virtue” states that humour needs to be a virtue for every Christian. He argues that Christianity is a religion of joy, and amusement is enjoyable; Christians should endorse amusement. Christianity is pro-health and healing, and laughter is at least as good for you as jogging and Brussels sprouts. James and Kate Williams (2005) in their article “Humour, Scripture and Christian discourse” argue that godliness and humour have tussled in Christian history, even though Scripture justifies the use of humour. This article explores the shape of creation–fall–redemption to see the perversions of humour and its redeemed uses in social critique, effective communication and in strengthening community within the family of God. Dance, Daryl Cumber (1977) observed that a great deal of the humour in the slave narratives deals with accounts of slaves outsmarting and getting revenge on these foolish old masters, deceiving them, stealing from them, humiliating them, beating them, and escaping from them.

Hennie Kruger (2014) interpreted certain passages in the Bible as evidence of humourous traits. In these cases humour is taken as an interpretative key. A prerequisite to provide a hermeneutical basis for reading the Old Testament in terms of humour has been discussed. A few texts that present Yahweh as laughing have been considered. These researchers tend to give less attention on rejoicing in the face of suffering in the context of COVID-19 by African Christians using the book of Romans 5:3-5.

Suffering and Humour in the Epistle of Romans

The letter of Romans shows the situation of Christians in Rome. Jews, Gentiles and Jewish Christians exiled from the city under Claudius, returned, to new and more difficult circumstances. Probably there are those returning from exiles that had suffered the confiscation of their property and facing widespread homelessness, experiencing difficulties in securing kosher food, and had to cope with restrictions on meeting together. In such circumstances, it was possible that the Gentile Christian population in Rome (perhaps the majority in the congregation's Paul addressed) was tempted to share in the anti-Judaism of their neighbours (Keener Craig, 2009:14-15). Russellh Collins (2017:1) states that it was during the reign of Emperor Claudius before 41 and 49 BCE that riots broke out among the Jews because of a certain "Chrestus." This, however, may have provoked the followers of Christ and the other Jews. Consequently, many Jews were banished from Rome (Acts 18:2). The Jewish exiles returned to Rome after the death of Claudius (54 CE). In Romans 16:3 these exiles were present when Paul wrote the epistle of Romans.

Paul believed in the revelation of God, which he classified as general and progressive in the order of creation and the special revelation in Christ (Romans 1:1ff). God is seen as the God of righteousness and wrath as well as the compassionate God. Humanity is subjected to the wrath of God because it is in the bondage of sin, the suffering caused by humanity, and even death. To effect a reconciliation between God and humanity, Christ has to come to perfect this reconciliation on the cross (Romans 8:1ff; Colossians 1:20). The life of a Christian begins from justification; the believer moves on to salvation and sanctification.

Reading the opening verse of Romans chapter five, Paul emphasizes that the fruits of justification by faith alone are peace and a pacified conscience.

This can be considered as a spiritual and mental peace in Christ and is by faith. Indeed, Paul insists that one may not separate these two aspects of "through Christ" and "by faith," a separation that he notes is not possible. More so, John Stott (2001:138) asserts that "Paul begins chapter 5 with the sequence of 'we' affirmations: 'we have peace with God,' 'we have gained access ... into grace', 'we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God', 'we also rejoice in our sufferings,' 'we shall be saved,' and 'we also rejoice in God'." Paul is showing why God allows suffering into the lives of people, especially Christians: because through the sufferings, we grow into maturity, and it shapes Christians and how we should approach life. Paul usage of "we" is in reference to the followers of Christ including himself.

Keener (2009:70) affirms that “Paul wants believers to trust God’s promise even when they faced obstacles that made it appear unrealistic apart from God.” Paul is under no illusion as to the serious and hopeless state of humanity’s condition. Subjectively considered, human beings are “helpless,” powerless to aid themselves, “ungodly,” blighted with a malaise that recalls the expose of Romans 1:18-32, and “sinners,” which is Paul’s favourite term for humans’ lustiness and sorry state which led to sufferings (Ralph P. Martin, 1999:37-38). Nonetheless, every society continues to make sense of human suffering. This is not something new to humanity because Apostle Paul himself experiences suffering from a different degree, ranging from pain, sorrow, affliction, and anguish. This anguish emanates from different and numerous experiences, such as sickness, loss (properties), guilt, and frustration with the absence of God in the situation (Simundson D. 1992:219-225). In a world where the tides of human suffering threaten to overwhelm whatever barriers we put in place to contain it, the Bible gives voice to the awful pain and suffering imaginable such as the suffering of the Israelites in Egypt and during their captivities to other nations in the Old Testament.

Suffering was not an academic subject with Apostle Paul but is more experiential. It was an experience he tasted that later ended with his death. Such experiences can be found in 2 Corinthians 11:24-28 and 2 Corinthians 12:10. In Romans 5:3-5, Paul takes a minute to discuss suffering. Many have even rejected God because of what is called the “Problem of Evil.” If God is good and powerful, the argument goes, why is there so much suffering in the world? Paul argued by saying we should boast or rejoice in our suffering. Why? Most people view suffering as pointless, meaningless, and utterly evil. Certainly, some forms of suffering might be that, as noted above, but little attention is given to the suffering in an era of COVID-19. This is where this study locates the reading of Romans 5:3-5 on how “rejoicing” can serve as a positive sense of humour to help Christians during COVID-19.

Contextual Reading of Romans 5:3-5 and COVID-19

Bediako (2000:3) alluded that Christianity is a universal religion accepted and practised in almost every part of the world; this paper will approach the text from a contextual interpretation, which considers the COVID-19 situation. As a contextual approach, it emphasizes a move from what the text meant to its original audience to what it means to readers today in their context to bring the message down-home to the global realities of COVID-19.

Contextual issues are an obligation on hermeneutics today in Biblical studies, especially in Africa. Mburu Elizabeth (2019:5) went on to assert that hermeneutics is necessary because we cannot hope to experience genuine transformation, whether of self or others if we lack the knowledge and skills to interpret the Bible effectively. Scripture is meant to be relevant to the context in which it is being taught and applied. And yet millions of believers in Africa are constantly being bombarded with Eurocentric ways of approaching the text of the Bible that ignore essential aspects of the social location, the economic, political, and theological culture of Africa.

Furthermore, this study tends to use the contextual interpretation that proposed an approach which is interjected between the Biblical realities with African realities, especially with COVID-19. African contextual hermeneutics is well needed for believers to experience God from their context. Contextualization, according to Kato (1985:23), is “making concepts or ideas relevant in a given situation.” In the words of Albert Ngengi (2012:xix), “this approach opens several perspectives in reading the same Biblical text in African contexts. Such an enterprise of comparing the Bible and the African situation triggers a methodology instinct in assessing as well as applying a hermeneutics of the Bible in an African context.” A contextual hermeneutical approach to COVID-19 as it relates to Romans 5:3-5 is needed, especially with the current realities of suffering that COVID-19 has brought to humanity, especially in Africa. Today, the enormity of suffering in the world makes it difficult to understand the concept of omnipotence in which God seemingly stands silently and apathetically above the world’s struggles. It is apparent to note that the world is in a stage of a dramatic experience with the situation of COVID-19.

The reality of COVID-19 and Its Effect in Africa

Scripps Research Institute on March 17, 2020, claims that Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses that can cause illnesses ranging widely in severity. The first known severe illness caused by a coronavirus emerged with the 2003 Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) epidemic in China. A second outbreak of severe illness arose in 2012 in Saudi Arabia with the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS). Then in December of 2019, Chinese authorities alerted the World Health Organization of an outbreak of a novel strain of coronavirus causing severe illness. Nevertheless, tracing the outbreak of the novel, COVID-19 began from China, specifically from the city of Wuhan in Hubei province.

Most countries around the globe decided to lockdown their countries some fully while others partial, and everyone is told to “stay at home”. On the other hand, is “social distance” and “work from home.” But the question is: how should poor families and the less privileged people (persons with disabilities, the homeless among others) respond to such kind of restrictions and hardship they face? Astrid Haas & Matthieu Teachout (April 16, 2020) gave an example, where people selling food and other goods or services such as hairdressing, foodstuffs in the market and the roadsides, bus drivers and conductors, motorbike riders, cleaners, those working in flower and tea farms, and carpentry, and for the most part, live a hand-to-mouth existence. An assessment in Kampala by Astrid and Teachout (April 16, 2020) showed that “93% of such people are already operating below the poverty rate, and the International Labour Organization approximates that these persons represent 66% of total employment across the continent of Africa.” For these individuals, their economic existence is face-to-face interactions with their customers daily. Such are the kind of people who cannot work from home as most governments have directed. A lockdown (partial or full) to enforce social distancing effectively stops all revenue-generating activities for them and their families as noted above.

Considering the effects of the outbreak, especially on the economy, it is clear that the poverty rate will increase because many have lost their jobs; many parents are struggling to feed their families. Most of the families in Africa live on under 5 dollars a day for their survival (Akintunde Akinleye, 4th May, 2020). Others need to go out to be able to get what the family will eat and survive. These poor people live in a single room with their entire family members; some are in the slums (Karen McVeigh, 28th March, 2019). From such a situation, how possible is it for families to adhere to government directives on lockdown, work from home, and keeping of social distance?

This has also increased the suffering of the people and the rate of gender-based violence is on the increase in most countries of the world due to COVID-19. In Kenya, for instance, the rate of teenage pregnancy has also risen because of the closure of schools, which seems to also add to the sufferings of most families (Sophie Partridge-Hicks, August 19th, 2020). In Africa, the family is more of a communal and not individualistic way of life. Family members look after each other both in good and bad times, there is a sense of sharing, togetherness, eating together (in most of the families), going to the farm, and storytime or discussion in the evening. , This especially so in the rural areas and it African Multidisciplinary Journal of Research (AMJR) Vol. 6 (1), 2021, ISSN 2518-2986 (88-101) binds the family together. This kind of togetherness however under threat due to COVID-19.

Furthermore, the impact of the virus is affecting families. Even with the measures that some leaders in Africa are trying to place, it still is not working and seems not to be reaching the poor masses of the society who are at the high number. Similarly, Mohamed Ahmed on 30th April, 2020 reported about a widow in Kenya who “thought the disease would just stick around for a few days before people forgot about it. But unknown to her, the outbreak would after a few months leave her and her eight children desperate, unable to get their daily food. *“For the last few days, Ms Kitsao has been forced to boil stones in the name of cooking to make her hungry children think a meal is being prepared as she has nothing to feed them on.”* This is part of the challenges that most families are facing, especially during this pandemic that has hit the globe. Likewise, there are reports in some parts of Kenya where some parents cannot afford to pay for their teenage girls to take a shower daily because of the economic hardship they are facing during the lockdown.

Even though COVID-19 is a sickness that is affecting the immune system of human beings, health workers may not completely heal the effect and suffering it has brought. When suffering is considered both from the physical and the psychological, then it is imperative to say that COVID-19 has brought suffering both to the people of the world, and more specifically, Africa where this paper is addressing. Consequently, the increase in the number of reported new cases from various countries of the globe is alarming. The African Union Commission (April 2020) notes that the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak affects all segments of the population and is particularly detrimental to members of those social groups in the most vulnerable situations. It continues to affect populations, including people living in poverty, the rich, older persons, those with disabilities, youth, and children. Early evidence indicates that the health and economic impacts of the virus are being borne disproportionately by poor people.

Presumptuously, people around the world are losing their jobs; most places are without access to running water; still, they are expected to keep washing their hands regularly. The situation has also brought the issue of sanitizers, which probably all those on the streets may not afford to buy. There are those in the refugee camps, or displaced persons, even persons living with disabilities who stand to suffer extremely from both the current pandemic situation and its aftermath (Raya A. Al-Masri, March 30, 2020). COVID-19 affects all, but it is more onerous for the poor than those of the middle class and above. Most of the African leaders promise to help the poor masses with food items and other materials, but still, not all are benefiting from such help.

Interestingly, most of the African leaders have cut their pay in the name of fighting the virus; some government have received financial support both from other countries and individuals within and outside their various countries. A country like Nigeria that gave the impression of giving some palliative to poor Nigerians seems not to fulfil its promise.

Thus, places like Lagos and Kano, among other states that are epic centres are left in a state of disarray (Peter Ezeah, 2020). One may be prompted to ask on the whereabouts of all the monies that the government receives from well-meaning Nigerians as a donation (Shaninomi Eribo, 30 June 2020). Also, what could be the response of the church in such situations where Christians are affected. These are concerns that may spark the minds of citizens with no one to respond adequately to give them hope amid this suffering and hard times.

According to some estimates, the economy could shed as many as one million jobs and shrink by 2 per cent because of COVID-19. The picture is even grimmer across a continent where 85 per cent of people live on less than US\$5.50 per day and 70 per cent of city dwellers live in crowded slums. A work stoppage of any length is life-threatening, which is what is happening due to COVID-19 (Charles R. Stith, 2020). Accordingly, with the rate of unemployment in the continent, one may conclude that the rate will be higher due to COVID-19's effect on the economy many people are losing their jobs (Africa Union Report, 09/04/2020). It is imperative to conclude that the unemployment rate will increase in the continent of Africa and even the developed nations of the world. But in the face of all these challenges that the poor people in Africa are going through during this COVID-19 pandemic, there is need for hope. The issue remains; what can the poor masses do? What encouragement can be there from the Bible for Christians in the midst of suffering? How can Africans approach suffering with rejoicing that serves as a sense of humour?

Rejoicing as Sense of Humour by Africans During COVID-19¹

Many Africans are also having a sense of humour in approaching the suffering that COVID-19 has brought to humanity and the world by “rejoicing” in various ways. Many have created comedy about the virus, some have sung songs on COVID-19, and some are making comics

¹ This paper will consider “rejoicing” as sense of humour within the context of COVID-19, and how most Africans face the challenges brought by the illness. Humour is defined as the ability to find things funny even when it is painful but you laugh about it. That is how this paper will make use of humour as the act of rejoicing within the context of suffering that you cannot change. While rejoicing in this paper is the act of being at peace in every situation and looking up to God for the solution to the problem and knowing that God is in control.

out of the situation, which keeps them moving in good spirits even though there may be fear and anxiety within them.

Salaudeen (17th of March, 2020) for instance, explains how some Africans are responding to the situation: with the whole world almost at a standstill over the rapid spread of Corona Virus to more than 125 countries, Africans are inspiring their continent with music and dance in an attempt to beat the virus. People are turning to fun, catchy songs to promote practices like social distancing and proper hand-washing.

Likewise, the Ndlovu Youth Choir in South Africa (May 30th, 2020) is making waves on social media with a song preaching preventive measures for COVID-19. The group dressed in brightly coloured traditional attire sings and dances while advising Africans in English and Zulu not to panic, to wash their hands, and to avoid touching their faces.

Furthermore, the song “Stand Together” an African Anthem of Solidarity against COVID-19 by various artists in the continent of Africa also shows how together, Africans can win the fight on COVID-19 (one campaign, 18 July 2020). Music artists have taken to social media to educate users on how to maintain personal hygiene in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic. Such artists include Asa (real name Bukola Elemide). Others include Koffi Olomide, Fally Ipupa, Robert Kyagulanyi, aka Bobi Wine joined hands with fellow Ugandan artiste Nubian Li titled *Corona Virus* (April Peavey, September 17 2020).

However, it is clear that the healthcare system is not a priority for many African leaders, and they put very little money into the sector. Anytime they are sick, or their children have health conditions, they opt to go outside their countries for medical treatment (Bukola Adebayo, on 10th April 2020). COVID-19 has made most of the African leaders to remain in their countries for treatment, even though some still travel to other countries for treatment.

Out of this, cartoonists have come up with jokes, where the Nigerian politicians are forced to use health facilities they refused to develop, and comedians are also not left out of these ‘jokes’. As Horace Walpole said: *“the world is a tragedy to those who feel, but a comedy to those who think.”*

When you consider the putting on of masks,, majority of Africans are not wearing them thinking that COVID-19 is a scam, with only a few wearing a mask properly as compared to those wearing on the chin. However, the reality is that not all citizens in most African countries can afford to buy a mask. Will they be thinking of money to buy food or sanitizer?

Or will they be thinking of money to buy a face cover? With the high rate of poverty in Africa, meeting up with the challenges that COVID-19 has brought is a real problem, as noted above. So the best most Africans do is to “rejoice” or laugh about it which portrays a sense of humour; by the way, we will all die someday, either through COVID-19, hunger, war, other diseases, among other ways.

Suffering is part of human life and experiences, which similarly produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us (Romans 5:3-5 RSV).

Contextual Reading of Romans 5:3-5 in the face of COVID-19

Njoroge (2001:215) observes that Christianity over the years has been shaped primarily by the way we read, hear, perceive, and interpret the Bible. For African Christianity to be life-giving, creative, healing, and authentic, African scholars, albeit a small number must rescue the Bible from the misuse and Eurocentric interpretation, which has disadvantage most African readers. In agreement with what Njoroge said, this reading will be with the reality of COVID-19 and how most Africans are approaching it with rejoicing which serves as a sense of humour in the face of suffering. Human beings experience suffering, although not in equal portions. When the blows of financial hardships, severe illness such as COVID-19, or death strike, it often feels unbearable. There is a general awareness that suffering is appropriate in some collective or general sense.

In a world that is drowning in an ocean of evil, the relationship wickedness has with suffering seems obvious. Even though with such a situation, Oduyoye (1993:36) is right to say that the Bible speaks of God and God’s dealing with the world and involvement in human realities. It is the written source of theology, and its challenges confirm, correct, modify, and reshape the belief in God that informs Africans and try a fresh approach to God.

Furthermore, Freedman (1992:325) upholds that in such situations, humanity needs to maintain humour which appears in different literary forms or styles even in the Bible. He reminds the reader that the Bible accommodates several words expressing rejoicing, laughing or laughter, whether in a spirit of goodwill or when ridiculing someone. Freedman (1992:325-333) accepts the fact that the Bible does not contain any word that can be translated as “humour” as the concept is understood in contemporary society. Although, when people hear the word humour, we enter a large conceptual space: jokes, laughter, amusement, ridicule, rejoice, irony, mockery, parody, satire, slapstick, buffoonery, farce, folly, the comic,

and the ludicrous. This study will consider using “rejoicing” to serve as sense of humour as the core of reading Romans 5:3-5 with regards to COVID-19, especially using how Africans are rejoicing with regards to the situation. When one thinks of laughter, jokes, farce, and irony as an expression of a sense of humour, then it is essential to consider parody and satire written or spoken as products of a person’s rejoicing and sense of humour, and also the comic, the ludicrous, and folly as often good occasions for expressing a sense of humour (Rik Peels, 2015:273).

Reading Romans 5:3-5 one will discover Paul’s use of “Rejoice” as having a sense of humour due to the situation he finds himself in as an apostle of Christ and can be applicable to Christians during COVID-19.

Reading Romans 5:3-5, Paul continues his discussion “more than that, we rejoice in our suffering.” The Greek verb *καυχώμεθα* which is in the first person plural means “we boast, we rejoice, or we glory.” It should also be noted here that the word rendered “glory, rejoice, or boast” in verse 3 is the same Greek word that is rendered in verse 2, where it reads that “we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God.” The rejoicing first is on sharing with the glory of God which is more of the eschatological reference, before rejoicing in the present suffering that they are facing. This kind of rejoicing is linked with the Christian sense of humour knowing that we will be with God in Heaven someday. As Everett Harrison (1994) note that

The word “rejoice,” used to characterize the hope of the Christian for participating in the glory yet to be revealed (v.2), now carries over to another area, different both in nature and in time, that of “sufferings.” Peace with God does not necessarily bring peace with other people. The actual conditions of life, especially for believers amid a hostile society, are not easy or pleasant, but the knowledge of acceptance with God, of grace, constantly supplied, and of the prospect of future glory enables believers to exult in the face of sufferings. The usual setting for the term “sufferings” is external suffering such as persecution, though it is used occasionally for distress resulting from external events affecting the human spirit.

The verse goes on “knowing that suffering produces ...” The Greek verb *εἰδότες* which refers to “knowing, remembering, or appreciating” is a perfect participle of “οἶδα.” It is perfect in form, but it functions as a present tense (David Abernathy, 2006:373). At this point, Paul does not give a full treatment on the subject of suffering, since he refers to it here simply as one link in a chain of events that benefit the Christian (Harrison, 1994). There are examples where Paul rejoiced, which showed he had some sense of humour. He, for instance, shows a sense of humour in other letters when he faces trial before procurator Festus and King Agrippa; the latter rhetorically asks whether Paul thinks that he can persuade Agrippa in such

a short time to become a Christian but Paul responded in Acts 26:29. Furthermore, , Paul's response in Galatians 5:11-12 was more of mockery and irony as an expression of rejoicing that indicate humour just as most Africans are doing with the COVID-19 situation.

Nevertheless, Apostle Paul acknowledges the reality of suffering but still "rejoices" which shows he has a sense of humour in 2 Corinthians 6:10, "as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing" (RSV. Acknowledging all his sufferings with "rejoicing" shows a sense of humour that gives him joy in Christ. So there is nothing wrong with feeling sorrow, pain, or grief during a challenging time such as the COVID-19. As human beings, we should not deny this reality in an attempt to look more spiritual than others. But through our challenges, pains, sorrows, hard times, we should "rejoice" to display our sense of humour and hope that everything will be fine with God. Rejoicing in our sufferings does not mean denying the pain and sorrows one is going through.

Similar examples of "rejoicing" indicating humour in the Bible include: Psalm 2:1-4, reading this section, one is prompted to ask: What is funny? Why is God laughing in such a situation? If God exists, then presumably, God is omniscient, necessarily existent, perfectly good, and excellent in power and majesty. But here are people plotting evil against the earth, and God laughs. Additionally, in Psalm 37:13, one finds where God is laughing at some situation that humanity is facing. Rejoicing begins from the inside and shows out, similarly having a sense of humour is inbuilt since even God in the Psalms is metaphorically shown as having a sense of humour. Apart from God in the Bible, other human beings also "rejoiced" showing they are humourous such as Sarah in Genesis 18:9-12, where she was told she would conceive, and she laughed. 1 King 18:26-27 tells how Elijah was mocking the prophets of Baal, whether their gods had travelled or were sleeping. Even though their situations differ from the COVID-19, they were able to have a sense of humour in response to their situations.

Christians' understanding of the truths of the gospel as they relate to suffering allows them to face life "rejoicing" (that serves as a sense of humour, joy, and confidence), which is not dependent on circumstances, even during COVID-19.

Knowing that the sufferings humanity is going through now will produce good character. Our mental focus must include some vital knowledge that God is using the present situation of COVID-19 to shape our character. Endurance is needed in the face of COVID-19 to help build Christian character in response to the pandemic, to value each other as fellow human beings, looking out for the best in one another. When the situation has shaped some of our

evil characters to good, like being individualistic to communal living, then we will have hope that the future will be bright and better when we walk together to overcome the challenges that COVID-19 has brought.

Those who endure their present sufferings that COVID-19 has brought will grow in patience, and the patience they learn from enduring in suffering contributes to the growth of their character.

It is the last step of the ladder in Romans 5:3-5 (“and character produces hope”), however, that distinguishes Paul from the moral philosophers of his day (Wright 2002:516–17). Instead of ending with “patient endurance produces character,” Paul goes on to say that “character produces hope.” The Greek noun ἐλπίδα which is derived from ἐλπίς meaning “hope, expectation, trust, and confidence.” But in this paper the meaning will be “hope” because suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us (Romans 5:3-5 RSV). The hope that Paul has in view is the eschatological hope that he has already mentioned in Romans 5:2 and will develop further in Romans chapter 8. Even as Christians go through the suffering that COVID-19 has brought to humanity, let us rejoice showing we have a sense of humour like Paul and our hope is set on God not our present suffering. It is not denying the reality of suffering but acknowledging that God is in control of the situation even though humanity has tried their best.

Conclusion

Rejoicing that shows our having a sense of humour is part of human being, the same way suffering is part of life and experiences of humanity. This paper has shown how Romans 5:3-5 can be applied contextually with the reality of suffering during COVID-19, specifically on the role of rejoicing, which serve as a sense of humour, in approaching the situation. This is evident in Romans 5:3-5, where Paul is rejoicing in his suffering. It is not the denial of suffering but the acceptance that it is part of humanity. Reading it contextually with the suffering that COVID-19 brought to humanity, it is okay to rejoice and have a sense of humour, hoping that everything will be alright. For Paul, the suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character. Character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us (Romans 5:3-5 RSV). Rejoicing that serves as a sense of humour shows that

Christians have the eschatological hope that Paul talked about in the Chapter, our hope is that someday believers will return to their maker (God).

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