

Faith, Hope, and Resilience: Unveiling the Spiritual Dimensions of Hope in Christian Education

Cyril Odia^{1*}

¹St. Patrick's Pontifical University, Maynooth, Ireland

Email: cyrilodia@gmail.com

Abstract

Many people can endure economic hardships and do suffer considerably due to the social and political structures within which they live. One way to understand why such people do not give up in life or stop working hard despite low economic rewards is connected to the element of the Christian faith. It is a spiritual gift that enables people to 'endure' challenges in life and grow strong amid adversity. This belief is mentioned in Romans 5:1-5 but does it really work that way? This research explored the possibility of people relying primarily on the word of God and participating in religious activities to cope with life's difficulties. It was significant to have focus group interviews with people living under such conditions of faith and economic hardship to understand how this gift works in real life. From this research carried out in 2022, it was discovered that people who are active in practising their Christian faith could cope with hardships that come their way in life because of a strong sense of hope.

Keywords: Christian beliefs; Coping mechanisms; Economic hardships; Endurance; Faith.

Abstrak

Banyak orang dapat bertahan dalam kesulitan ekonomi dan sangat menderita karena struktur sosial dan politik di mana mereka hidup. Salah satu cara untuk memahami mengapa orang-orang seperti itu tidak menyerah dalam hidup atau berhenti bekerja keras meskipun imbalan ekonominya rendah adalah karena adanya unsur iman Kristen. Ini adalah karunia rohani yang memungkinkan orang untuk 'bertahan' menghadapi tantangan dalam hidup dan bertumbuh kuat di tengah kesulitan. Keyakinan ini disebutkan dalam Roma 5:1-5, tetapi apakah benar demikian? Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi kemungkinan orang-orang yang mengandalkan firman Tuhan dan berpartisipasi dalam kegiatan keagamaan untuk mengatasi kesulitan hidup. Sangatlah penting untuk melakukan wawancara kelompok terfokus dengan orang-orang yang hidup di bawah kondisi iman dan kesulitan ekonomi seperti itu untuk memahami bagaimana karunia ini bekerja dalam kehidupan nyata. Dari penelitian yang dilakukan pada tahun 2022 ini, ditemukan bahwa orang-orang yang aktif dalam mempraktikkan iman Kristen mereka dapat mengatasi kesulitan yang menghampiri mereka dalam hidup karena rasa pengharapan yang kuat.

Kata Kunci: Keyakinan Kristen; Mekanisme coping; Kesulitan ekonomi; Daya tahan; Iman.

INTRODUCTION

One main area of education today for many young people is on resilience (Condly, 2006; Jackson & Martin, 1998; Shean, 2015). Many people do not seem to have sufficient capacity to endure pain, disappointments and failures in life. In one of the previous research on this topic, there was an emphasis on the "diversity and complexity of both understanding and promoting healthy outcomes in youth confronted by adversity" (Linda Liebenberg & Ungar, 2008, p. 4). Consequently, there have been different approaches to resolving this problem through the introduction of skills and activities to help young people develop the mental capacity to withstand the regular challenges of life, especially through sports and other recreational activities (Coalter, 2003; Hastie, 2011).

However, there are other people who are able to develop a substantial level of resilience and endure many hardships without necessarily having recourse to sports or other physical activities. They rely

*Corresponding Author

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mainly on prayer, meditation on the word of God and participating in liturgical activities in the Church (Pease & Pease, 2016). This second group of people confirm the scriptural passages that talk about hope and faith in the Lord Jesus, which enables one to develop the capacity to endure suffering. One example of this is found in Romans 5:1-5 which reads:

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. 3 And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, 4 and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 5 and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.¹

The element of Hope is one of the key topics in the Secondary School curriculum for Religious Education (RE) in Nigeria. This theme forms a major part of the soteriological elements of the content (van den Heuvel, 2020). The experience of profound suffering and unacceptable economic hardships have mysteriously shaped the faith experience and theology of Christians in Africa (Robert, 2000). Suffering and Hope are keys in the Biblical understanding of the Christ-event (Green, 2001). Jesus had been wrongly accused of being a sadist and chose suffering like a psychopath. This will always remain wrong as the divine plan of the Father had been made clear through the victory of Calvary.

Looking at the Nigerian Christian community, one can find a high level of endurance despite the very difficult socio-economic situation (not excluding religious persecution) that abounds (Mambula, 2016). Others have looked at this capacity to endure hardship from a psychosocial viewpoint with a specific emphasis on learning and school life (Wosnitza, Peixoto, Beltman, & Mansfield, 2018) but have not fully explored the positive influence of the Christian faith in the conversation. Consequently, one may erroneously attribute the high level of hope and courage among the suffering and economically disadvantaged communities of believers to psychological reasons.

This paper attributes the hope of the suffering Church to the gift of faith, which according to Romans 5:2, enables us to have 'access to the grace in which we stand'. Suffering seems to be unending from many observable pastoral situations in the world. However, in economically disadvantaged countries in Africa, the situation is even more disturbing. With this background, one may imagine a depressing situation of despair and family crises here and there. Fortunately, this is not the case in a recent study I carried out in 2022. This is consistent with previous studies on resilience from the perspective of Participation, Observation, Reflection and Transformation (Brown, D'Emidio-Caston, & Benard, 2001).²

RESEARCH METHOD

Using qualitative (focused group in-depth interview) research method, participants were Catholics from three different parishes in both the northern and southern parts of Nigeria. The three parishes were sampled according to the economic status of the local area. They are categorised into Urban, Rural and Mixed (both urban and rural). The research was carried out between May and August 2022. Participants

¹ 5 δικαιωθεντες ουν εκ πιστεως ειρηνην εχομεν προς τον θεον δια του κυριου ημων ιησου χριστου 2 δι ου και την προσαγωγην εσχηκαμεν τη πιστει εις την χαριν ταυτην εν η εστηκαμεν και καυχωμεθα επ ελπιδι της δοξης του θεου 3 ου μονον δε αλλα και καυχωμεθα εν ταις θλιψεσιν ειδοτες οτι η θλιψις υπομονην κατεργαζεται 4 η δε υπομονη δοκιμη η δε δοκιμη ελπιδα 5 η δε ελπις ου καταισχυνει οτι η αγαπη του θεου εκκεχυται εν ταις καρδιαις ημων δια πνευματος αγιου του δοθεντος ημιν

² Also known as the 'PORT-able' approach.

were mixed in gender, age and economic background (the three strategic categories required to ascertain the effects of wealth, generational gap and gender balance).

Using the focused group method. Forty-seven participants were selected at random based on plurality and mixed variation typical of a regular parish in the local context. Conducted in May, June and August 2022.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research was to find out how economic status influences participation in Church and affects the understanding of Christian faith and hope. There were different meetings with seven different groups made up of six and sometimes seven members of mixed ages and gender, and income levels. Questions were asked about how the economic hardship in the country has affected their sense of hope in God. The questions also wanted answers on what other factors may be influencing their 'sense' of hope.

Some responded in relation to their families and domestic situation. For example, a participant, Robert³, who is 52, said: "When I am passing through many hardships, especially with my children, I feel a bit hopeless, sometimes, but I don't allow the family problems to affect my personal relationship with God". Grace, a lady in her 30s, explained that the gift of a new job opportunity was believed to have been received from God, and that experience became a moment of hope:

My hope increased in God when I got a new job with an international organisation. Since then, I have gone to Church more regularly and paid my tithe. But sometimes, responsibilities in the office clash with the timing of weekday activities in the parish.

Other responses were in the area of health challenges and difficulties. Sarah, a widow in her 40s, said: "When I lost my husband, the way the parishioners came to support me just confirmed that I have not been wasting my time in Church all these years. I also try to do the same to other bereaved families in the parish". For this widow, the witness and sense of community of the local faith group in the parish made all the difference in her difficult life. Her sense of hope was nourished by her relationship with the faith community. Jonah, a retired military officer in his 60s, noticed that his family's sense of hope grew after he had an amputation. The role of the father figure in his family had a deeper meaning when he had to undergo that experience. From his interview, the amputation brought about faith and peace: "After I lost one leg and retired from military service, my children and grandchildren started going to church more often, and I have peace of mind".

One other theme that was found during the research was in the area of unemployment. Edward, a 26-year-old young graduate, has been able to keep an optimistic vision of life despite the challenges of not having a job in a country without social benefits or a working welfare system. He must rely on family and friends for daily survival, and being the eldest in his family, the pressure is enormous within the local context⁴. He expresses his ability to survive based on his faith experience in his local community:

I have been unemployed for some years now, and some youths have resorted to crime and gang kidnapping, but I find my strength to keep trying to look for a job, no matter how small, when I meet with people of faith and hope in Church

³ The names of all the participants have been changed to maintain their confidentiality in this work without compromising their identity, gender and social status. This helps to keep the integrity of their contribution and consistency of their thoughts to the reader.

⁴ In many Nigerian cultures, the eldest child is expected to be financially and morally successful and support the younger siblings. This responsibility becomes a real pressure when the eldest child is unemployed.

Table 1 Gender and number of participants⁵

Participants (gender)	Males	Females	Total
Participants (number)	20	27	47

Table 1 shows the gender and numbers of the 47 people who participated in this interview. The first line shows the gender, and the second line shows the number. It was noticed that there were generally more female members in the Church. This is consistent with the general higher number of females who participate more actively in church activities (Walter, 1990).

Table 2 Age distribution of participants

Youth 16-20	Young adults 21-30	30+	Total
15	11	21	47

Table 2 shows the age distribution of the participants in the focus group interview for this fieldwork. One participant was 18 years old, eleven were between 21 and 30 years old, and twenty-one participants were above 30 years old. All participants above 30 were married and grouped in the same category.

Table 3 Three types of parish location

Urban parish	Mixed parish	Rural	Total
10	20	17	47

Table 3 shows the locations where the interviews took place. Ten participants were interviewed in an urban (city) parish in a comparatively high-income area. Seventeen participants were from a rural parish area with very low income. Twenty participants were from a parish that is made up of a mixture of a semi-urban area with a combination of the economically stable and poor living side by side. This kind of parish is described here as a 'mixed' parish.

Table 4 The monthly average income in USD of participants showing economic status

Income (USD 2000) m	income (USD 500) m	income (USD 50) m	Dependants/no income	Total
5	9	19	14	47

Table 4 contains the average monthly income of participants, with 14 people without any fixed or calculable income and entirely depending on support. 5 participants earn about two thousand USD monthly. 9 participants earn an average of 500 USD monthly, and the majority earn around 50 USD monthly.

⁵ There was no specific rationale for selecting the gender of participants, but it was easier to find a slightly higher number of females than males who volunteered to participate in the research.

Table 5 Response to the questions on hardship and its influence on personal faith

“Challenges have made me stronger and deepened my faith.”	45	Urban 11 Mixed 13 Rural 21
“Hardships make it difficult for me to serve God or believe in God” (got zero response)	0	Urban 0 Mixed 0 Rural 0
Sometimes I doubt if the hope I have will consistently remain strong	2	Urban 0 Mixed 1 Rural 1
Total	47	47

Table 5 shows responses to specific quotations on personal responses to questions connected to hardship and faith. All 45 participants agreed that ‘challenges’ have helped in some ways to deepen their personal faith in God. All 45 participants disagree that hardships make it difficult for them to ‘serve’ or ‘believe in’ God. 2 participants are not sure if they will remain consistently strong in their faith. One is from a rural setting, and the other is from a mixed (urban and semi-urban) setting.

Table 6 Response to questions on the source of hope

“My sense of faith is not based on politics, economy or external material things.”	17	Urban 9 Mixed 5 Rural 3
“hoping for a long time without change can lead to depression.”	1	Urban 0 Mixed 1 Rural 0
“I believe that hope needs to have a sense of tangible signs that things will improve, especially in the eradication of poverty.”	29	Urban 11 Mixed 23 Rural 5
Total	47	

In table 6, all participants were given the option to choose which of the sentences was most applicable to their situation in relation to their sense of hope. The highest response of 29 participants was to the option that they ‘believed’ hope needs to have a tangible sign and will ultimately lead to an improvement in the eradication of poverty. One response was that ‘hoping for a long time without change can lead to depression’. Seventeen other responses did not link their sense of faith to material, political or economic expectations.

One may argue that by providence, the mysterious effect of unjust suffering and deprivation sometimes leads to graces that come as insights and opportunities. The spiritual significance of suffering

is expressed in Romans 5:4-5. It can be a production vault for 'endurance', 'character' and 'hope'. Christians are motivated to work tirelessly for justice and peace in the world because of the constant *hope* of the capacity of the Holy Spirit to transform human beings to make the world a better place. In hope, there is no room for despair or laziness in the effort to work for a just society and the promotion of the natural law.

From a pastoral interaction between some local African situations and Biblical imagery, these 'products' of suffering are explored to reveal the connections of how they ultimately lead to a permanent state of 'hope'. This hope also has a characteristic of 'reliability' as it "does not disappoint us" (Romans 5:5). This situation confirms the presence of the Holy Spirit, "Which has been given to us" (Romans 5:5). This is the primary reason why many Christians in poor countries are genuinely happy and have a strong faith. It may be somewhat considered a form of spiritual compensation for the material loss from which they suffer.

The justification by faith leads to 'peace', and it comes from Jesus Christ. By the same Christ, we have access to 'grace' which is the foundation upon which 'we stand'.

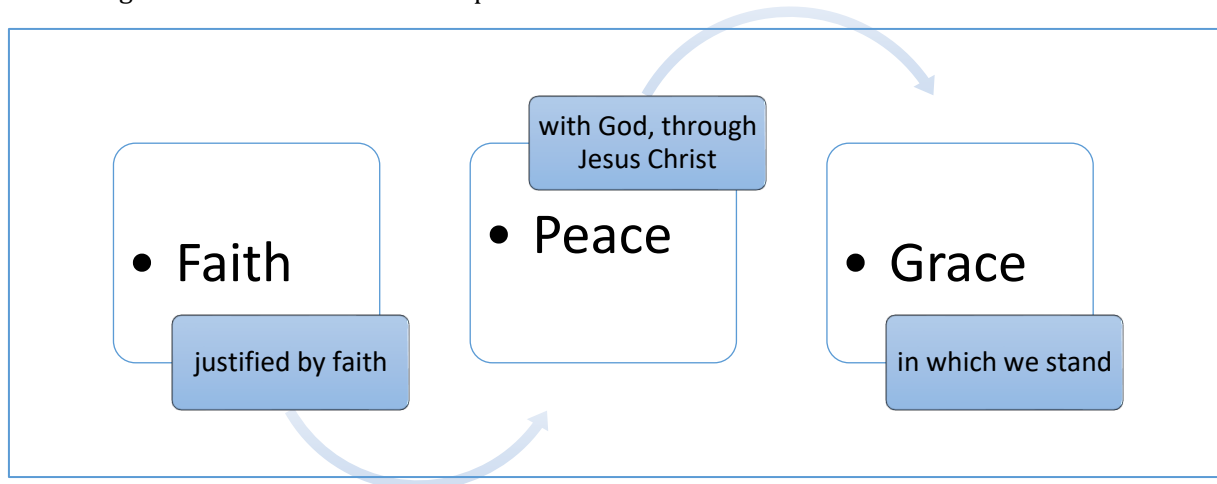


Figure 1 Romans 5:1-2a on the link of Faith, Peace and Grace

Figure 1 is a design of Faith, Peace and Grace based on Romans 5:1-2. The justification by faith leads to peace with God (through Jesus), and this state or situation is 'grace' on which we can stand and function even if other things external are tough and difficult.

The text continues in the second verse (Romans 5:2b) with the verb *καυχώμεθα* 'to boast' 'to exult' 'to rejoice' 'to glory' in our hope. This suggests that the writer gets sufficient strength from the gift of hope to overlook any form of suffering. The following lines explore what can happen with suffering understood within the context of Christian hope. Boasting in suffering because of its effect when mixed with hope. It produces 'endurance'. This means that suffering with hope equals endurance. Hope is the divine element that transforms the human consequences of suffering. This transforming power of hope is an act of grace.

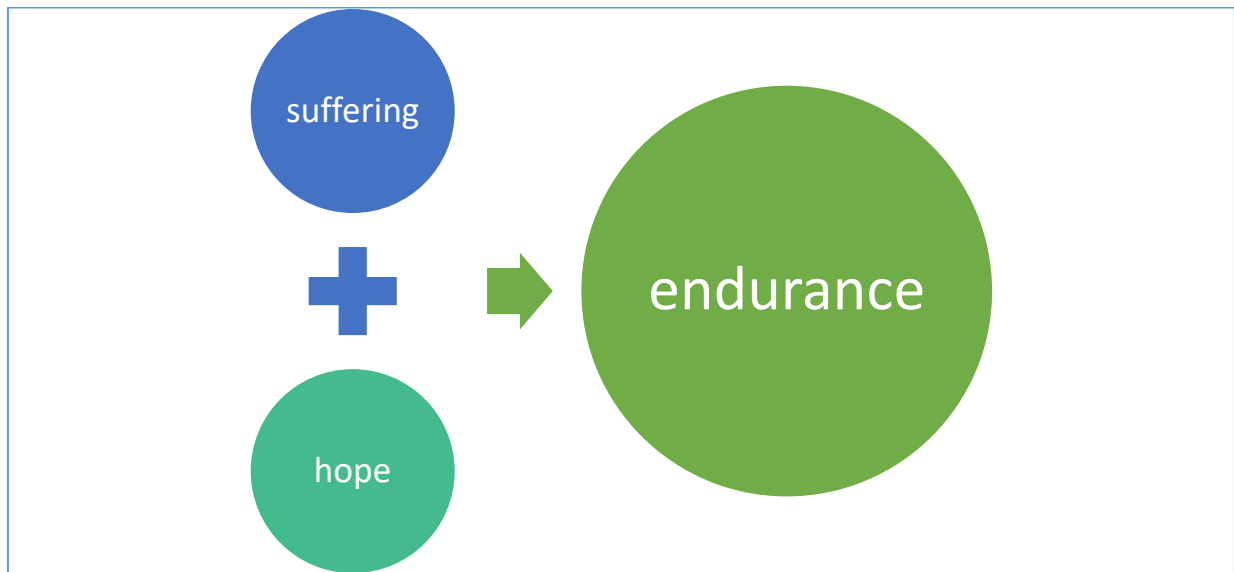


Figure 2 What can 'suffering' with 'hope' produce? Romans 5:3-5

Figure 2 shows the combination of suffering and hope. Suffering well endured leads to endurance. This is possible because hope does not 'disappoint' (Romans 5:5). Suffering is anchored in hope from a strong capacity to endure.

This 'boasting' in our hope is a Christological aspect of faith that is anchored in Christ (Rom 5:2). It is an aspect of hope that is described as merited by the passion of Christ. Because of the victory of Christ, we have hope. Our hope is permanent because it is based on the peace we have with God (irrespective of various circumstances). This peace comes from the gift of faith (Rom 5:1). The gift comes from the "Holy Spirit that has been given to us" (Rom 5:5). This text suggests that a sustained faith in Jesus, made possible by the action of the Holy Spirit, is the reason why we have hope

The logical sequence of what follows next seems to come from one who has gained personal knowledge from the salvific effect of hope. A kind of knowledge which makes more sense only after one has gone through the desert or passion experience. The logic is faith logic and not mere human thinking. Within the context of hope, suffering produces 'endurance', and 'endurance' produces 'character', and the circle is complete by character reproducing 'hope'. All this is made possible by the Love of God in our 'hearts' by the gift of the Holy Spirit.

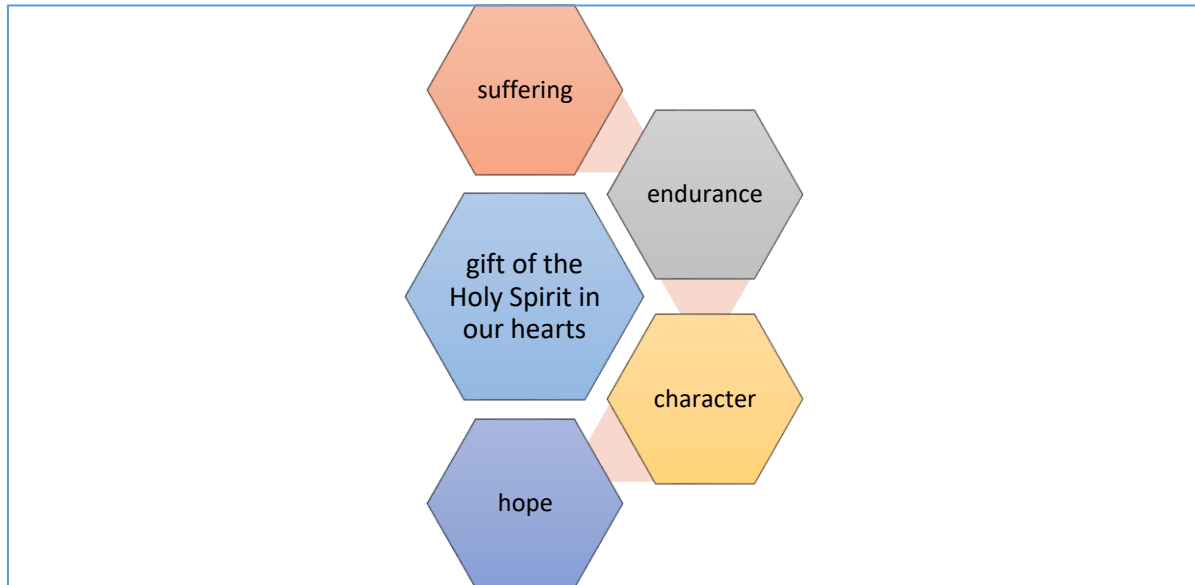


Figure 3 The effect of the Holy Spirit in the heart by the gift of hope.

Figure 3 represents the working of the Spirit in the heart, which leads to hope during suffering Romans 5:3-5

We can reverse this by saying that by the Holy Spirit, we are given God's Love, and it doesn't disappoint (HOPE), and that marks our character of enduring suffering. Suffering brings endurance, and endurance brings character, and character brings hope. Consequently, when one gets the gift of hope in the heart, it shows there is a character, and character shows long enduring and enduring helps one to cope with suffering.

Perhaps one way of looking at *hope* from this context would be to see it as connected with a personal relationship with the person of Jesus Christ, who is the 'hope'. Hope is not just a state of mind but a spiritual union with Jesus Christ. All the sacraments of the Church are available to the poorest and most suffering. This identity of the Church needs to be further emphasised. It is an identity that goes beyond what is 'temporal' to what is 'eternal'.⁶

Element of Hope In The Nigerian Christian Religious Education Syllabus

There are many examples from both the Old and New Testaments on the theme of hope and faith in the secondary school syllabus in Nigeria. A clear distinction is made between hope in things temporal and hope in things eternal. There is a need to hope for things that are seen and immanent for daily human survival and basic dignified living. While this may never be fully satisfied in the lifetime of many people,

⁶ "16. That is why we never give up. Though our bodies are dying, our spirits are being renewed every day. 17. For our present troubles are small and won't last very long. Yet they produce for us a glory that vastly outweighs them and will last forever 18. So we don't look at the troubles we can see now; rather, we fix our gaze on things that cannot be seen. For the things we see now will soon be gone, but the things we cannot see will last forever." 2 Cor. 4:16-18 New living translation.

there is no need to despair in the course of fighting to have a better life on earth. This is because there is the gift of hope in things that are 'unseen'. 18. *So we don't look at the troubles we can see now; rather, we fix our gaze on things that cannot be seen. For the things we see now will soon be gone, but the things we cannot see will last forever.*" 2 Cor. 4:18. In the Christocentric focus of the secondary school syllabus in Nigeria, this element of Hope is taught in different areas, and some of the major aspects are covered in the senior secondary school years.

In the first year of senior Secondary School (14 years and above), there is a unit in the syllabus titled: 'Jesus as the Lamb, the Door and Good Shepherd'. The passages of scriptures that the students are presented with are John 1:29-34, (which talks about Jesus as the lamb of God) and John 10:1-18, where Jesus talks of himself as the 'Door' and the 'Good Shepherd'. In the 3rd year of secondary (16 years and above), The syllabus contains detailed content about the passion of Christ. His betrayal, trial, Crucifixion and Death. This is followed by the 'resurrection accounts' from the Gospels. The topics in this class are divided into:

- a) The Trials of Jesus before the high Priest (Matthew 26:36-75, Luke 22:66-71, Mark 14:53-75), before Pontius Pilate Matthew 27:11-31, Luke 23:1-5, Mark 23:1-25), and before Herod (Luke 23:6-12).
- b) 'The Crucifixion, Death and Burial of Jesus' (Matthew 27:32-66, Luke 23:26-56 and Mark 15:16-47).
- c) The Resurrection accounts (Luke 24:1-35, Mark 16:1-14, Matthew 28:1-10) and the significance of the resurrection of Christ in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8, 12-20.

Faith in the power of the suffering of Christ is a motivation for African Christians who may be suffering different forms of persecution and hardship (Federal Ministry of Education, 2007). This is because 'Hope' always contains trust. ⁷ For the students, hope is personalised and tangible from their learning of the life and death of Jesus, who is our hope. (1 Timothy 1:1 "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus command of God our Saviour and Christ Jesus our Hope"). Hope is equally sustained by constant Love. (1 Cor. 13:13 "And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love").

The spiritual gift of hope has both a transient and immanent dimension (Ekeke & Eyo, 2016). Because of the transient dimension that contains belief in ontological realities, one is prepared to use this gift to build up immanent realities on earth. One can describe the resilient and courageous aspect of hope as the 'theology from below'. It is pragmatic and focused on daily lived reality in building a better world and resisting oppression, suffering and despair. The other aspect of this theology of hope can be described as a 'theology from above' that sees hope as a divine gift given by the Holy Spirit, which helps us not only live with Christian optimism in the present life but also with confidence in the world to come (Clark, 1992).

Consequences of Hope

The text analyses the source of hope (suffering produces *endurance*, v.4 endurance produces *character*, and character produces *hope*). Sufferings abound in life, and Christ did not avoid them. Rather, he triumphed over his sufferings, and it became the source of salvation. This Christological understanding of suffering is clearly discussed in the content of the Christian Religious Education syllabus in Nigeria. A suffering that can lead to salvation is worth enduring. It is never futile. The challenge is for the students to identify what kinds of suffering have salvific characteristics. Paramount among this is any form of suffering perpetuated because of one's faith in Jesus Christ. Similarly, physical or institutional challenges that are designed to discourage or punish people because they are followers of Christ are to be endured, resisted

⁷ Romans. 15:13 "May the God of hope fill you with joy and peace as you TRUST in him, so that you may overflow with HOPE by the power of the Holy Spirit" (emphasis mine).

and even seen as ‘producing character’ (Rom. 5:3). It is against this background that CRE within the local context, helps build resilience in young people. This hope is not a utopic state of mind that is detached from reality. Rather, it is sustained by centuries of synchronisation of faith and life, struggle and hope, death and afterlife (Houle, 2011).

Effects of the Slave Trade

The was huge trafficking in Africans from the 15-19 centuries, with an estimate of more than 300,000 thousand sailors involved in the trade in west Africa alone. This experience has marked the psyche of Africans in faith, trust and economics. Since then, any form of education (including theological education) in Africa will always mean liberation. It has been a constant struggle from one generation to the next. For some, slavery was never over. Economically, there seems to be no immediate solution to the long-lasting impact of such a drain in a situation described as one which was characterised by a ‘lack of choice’ (Lovejoy, 1983, p. 6).

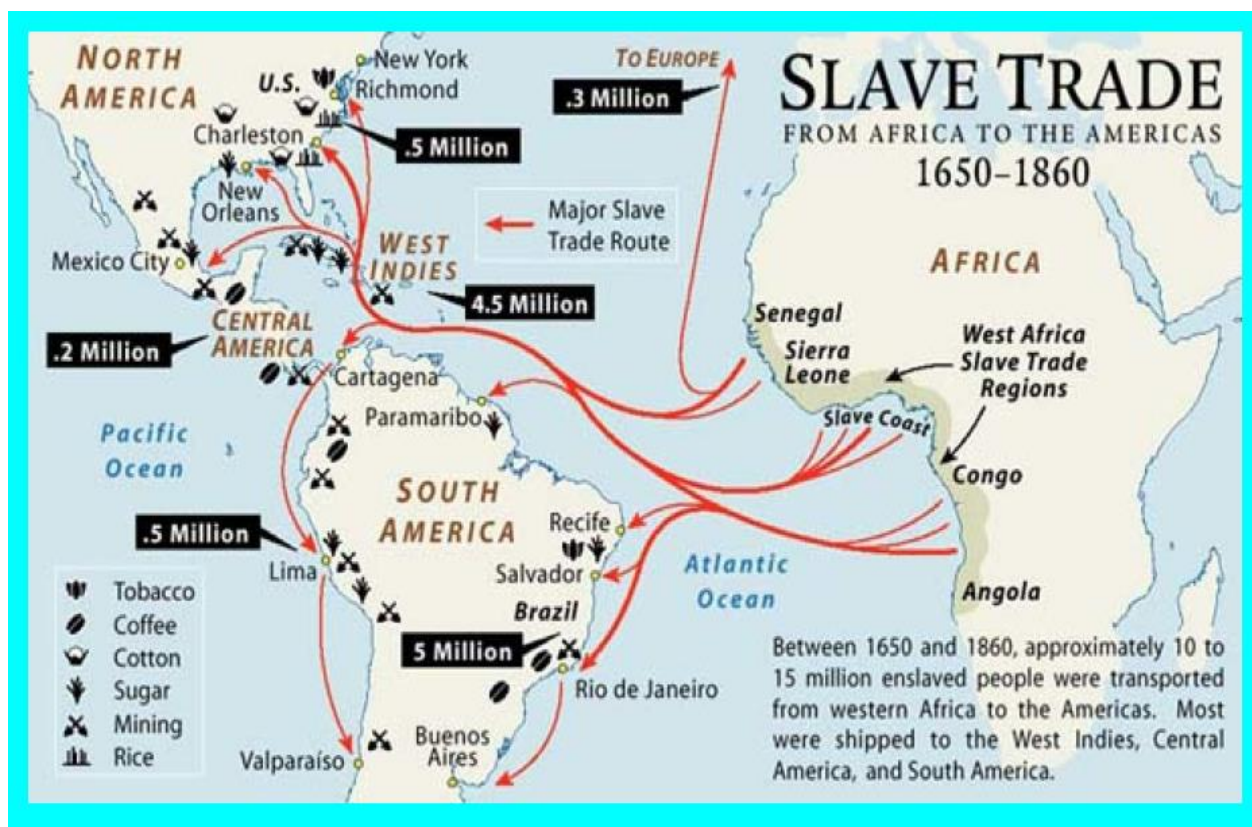


Figure 4 Transatlantic black slave trade 1650-1860⁸

⁸ Image from <https://806055255811860650.weebly.com/>

Figure 4 shows the transatlantic slave trade, estimated at about 15 million African people to Europe and the Americas. Many slaves were moved multiple times. The coaster areas of Africa were the main transit routes, with the main means of transportation being by the sea.

Biblical theologians sometimes describe the letter to the Romans as the book of “hope” (Heil, 1987, p. 4). and to a very large extent, that is what it is. Previous studies have also tried to explain this understanding. While other scriptural texts do the same, this passage of interest in the letter to the Romans we are looking at could be considered a good summary of a biblical spirituality of hope.

Table 7 Hope is understood as immanent and transient

Hope immanent	Hope transient	Hope immanent and transient
Food	Love	Faith
Clothes	Peace	Hope
Shelter	Joy	Work
Development goals		

Table 7 shows three levels of hope. Hope as immanent is realised in material and existential fulfilment. Hope transient is linked with love, peace and joy, which is an experience of the heart and inner awareness. Hope can also be seen as a mixture of both immanent and transient as faith, hope and work.

The spiritual gift of hope has both *transient* and *immanent* dimensions. Because of the transient dimension that contains belief in ontological realities, one is prepared to use this gift to build up immanent realities on earth. One can describe the resilient and courageous aspect of hope as the ‘theology from below’. It is pragmatic and focused on daily lived reality in building a better world and resisting oppression, suffering and despair. The other aspect of this theology of hope can be described as a ‘theology from above’ that sees hope as a divine gift given by the Holy Spirit, which helps us not only live with Christian optimism in the present life but also with confidence in the world to come (Heil, 1987; Rahner, 1973).

CONCLUSION

The Christian education syllabus in the Nigerian system is Christocentric and educates about non-aggressive resilience using scripture. This resilience extends to other aspects of the life of the Christian that may not relate to persecution or systemic antagonism. While the primary challenge of the African continent is still economical, many people have developed ways to survive in very difficult circumstances because of the gift of resilience they have received through Christian education.

Economic poverty clouds theology and biblical study in financially deprived communities. On the one hand, liberation and poverty eradication are the primary focus of the work of Christian evangelisation. On the other hand, there is a genuine concern that if the theology of hope is not well understood, it could be lost when there is economic growth. This fear is legitimate as theologians in financially advantaged communities can see that hope goes beyond materialism to spirituality. It is a spiritual need, gift and tool which can be used far beyond the struggles of economic emancipation and social liberation. One of the most important findings of this research is that economic disadvantage does not have the capacity to weaken or destroy faith. This is a realisation that is important to keep studying especially among the younger generations. No data was collected among from children of primary school age which is beyond the limitation of this research. With the assumption of a decline in attention span among children, it may be useful to carry out further research in with a younger generation to compare the findings. Another

important finding in this study is the fact that faith, hope and resilience work together in a spiritual matrix that is not mutually exclusive. Challenges reinforce hope, and resilience makes one stronger to face new challenges. It is applicable to both spiritual and material wellbeing.

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