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Suffering, Salvation, and the Sovereignty of God: Towards a Theology of Suffering

A popular local Pentecostal chorus, well known around West Africa, begins with the lines, “Me I no go suffer, I no go beg for bread; God of miracles na my papa O! (I will neither suffer, nor will I beg for bread; for the God of miracles is my Father!). This seemingly innocuous chorus is reflective of the growing sentiment among many African Christians today who seek a life free from suffering because of their perceived favored status as children of God. Life, however, is full of crises and Christians are not exempt from them. How a Christian handles lingering crises such as suffering reveals much about their commitment, conviction, and allegiance to the Savior. Often, Christians from backgrounds that are animistic face extreme pressure and temptation to revert to pre-Christian practices in their quest for solutions to the problem of suffering. While they remain in their new faith, some may have no qualms about visiting a shaman or diviner for help, thereby slipping into the practice of dual allegiance. In their seminal study on folk religion and animism, Paul Hiebert, Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tienou advocate the development of a theology of suffering, among other issues, as a remedy to this reported predicament among African Christians and others from animistic backgrounds (1999:164, 165). This study is an attempt to develop a theology of suffering that will respond to the problem of dual allegiance, with the aim of providing a biblical explanation that will ultimately lead to worldview transformation. In order to thoroughly engage the beliefs that prompt people to turn to shamans/diviners, an understanding of the African worldview will be essential. Nonetheless, this will be preceded by a brief inquiry regarding suffering and its nature.

Suffering and Its Nature

Intrinsic to the human existence is the experience of suffering, which remains an enigma with mysterious and grief-causing qualities. Etymologically, suffering is derived from the words “*sub*” (under), and “*ferre*” (to bear), and means to “bear under something” (James 2012:xv). Although this subject has been discussed extensively by many scholars in every age, it continues to be a topic difficult to define. Suffering can be witnessed in epic proportions, such as in the phenomenon of the African slave trade, or in the form of the Jewish holocaust. Other examples of epic dimensions of suffering on the personal level are the experiences of Jesus and Job (Liderbach 1992:22). Suffering, when experienced on the personal and existential levels of human life, leads to the question, “Why me?” (Richard 1992:1). In many ways suffering is associated with evil, and could be described as the result of encountering evil in all its forms—metaphysical, physical, and moral (James 2012:xvii-xviii). It may be caused by other humans, or may result from what a person encounters in life (Van Bavel 1990:139). Despite how much has been written on the subject, it is still acknowledged that suffering is mysterious, and inexplicable. For at the heart of the issue of suffering is the question of the nature of God (Richard 1992:8).

Suffering and Its Causes in the African Worldview

A people’s worldview largely determines their beliefs, behavior, and practices. Although the continent of Africa has nearly a billion inhabitants with diverse ethnic and cultural groupings, there are a few certain beliefs that find common ground among all the various groups. Those shared beliefs include a belief in God, divinities, the existence of powerful, capricious spirits, and the practice of magic, and medicine (Idowu 1973:139). For the African, the world of the spirits is even more real than the physical world. They believe that the effect of what transpires in the spirit world is what becomes evident in the physical world. The universe is believed to be replete with ubiquitous, capricious spirits that control the wellbeing and fortunes of those on earth (Okorocho 1992:173). There are five interrelated spiritual beings that need to be taken into account in the sub-Saharan, and largely African universe, namely, God—the Supreme Spirit; Ancestors, or the living dead—who are closer to humans; deities, or divinities—who are personal spiritual beings that live with God; spirits or spirit forces—which unlike deities have no personalities, but may be adopted and domesticated and provided with priests and devotees; and magic, or medicine/charms—which require an expert or mediator who strives to maintain relations between the human community and the non-human world by seeking “to understand, predict, control, and reinvent

their world” (Uzukwu 2012:61, 62). To the African, nothing just happens without a cause, it is therefore important to determine the spiritual etiology for every occurrence, especially if it entails suffering (Imasogie 1983:60). When the African suffers it is usually as a result of the following major reasons—spiritual powers, sorcery, an enemy, a person’s destiny, a spell—either ancestral or present, or a power object. A number of these factors are interrelated. Each of these elements will be briefly considered below.

Spiritual Forces

Suffering for the African is perceived to be a natural phenomenon that is a part of the human experience which tends to lead the sufferer to seek more earnestly for God (Magesa 2004:22, 23). However, among the major culprits responsible for this condition are spiritual forces present in the African etiology. These spiritual forces, which may be divinities or ancestors, become displeased that the living are dishonoring them and as a result cause misfortune or suffering in various forms unless they can be appeased. After a diviner has determined the exact cause the usual practice is to offer a sacrifice to remove the displeasure of the ancestors or divinities. Suffering caused by ancestors or divinities are not regarded as evils, but as “punishments aimed at correcting immoral behavior” (Ray 1976:150).

Sorcery

Africans believe in the power of spirits and mystical forces that can control a person’s wellbeing and cause suffering (Turaki 2002:167). Illness, barrenness, poverty, and death can be brought upon a hapless victim through magic, witchcraft, or sorcery (Kunhiyop 2006:374). Witchcraft beliefs and accusations are rife on the continent and are commonly believed to be the reasons behind the misfortune and suffering of many.

Enemies

The belief that a person’s life of suffering may be due to the working of an enemy is depicted in the Yoruba proverb which states, only a dead man has no enemy. Consequently, when Africans experience a prolonged period of suffering, the question that often comes to mind is not “why” but “who is responsible?” It is for this reason that the diviner, or shaman plays a critical role in discovering and redressing the situation for the sufferers. The enemy could be a member of one’s family who may employ the services of a sorcerer to cast a spell or to prepare a charm to induce emotional, financial, or physical reverses. At other times the enemy may simply be a rival who is envious of a person’s progress who out of jealousy

would decide to use witchcraft, evil charms, or poison to get at the victim and make them suffer (Peel 2000:80).

Destiny

There is a strong fatalistic belief among many tribes in Africa that a person's success or suffering in life is greatly dependent upon their destiny or fate. Thus the wicked may prosper and the just suffer due to a belief in the arbitrary nature of a destiny assigned before a person's birth (Ray 1976:59). It is for this reason that diviners play an indispensable role in African communities, for they are the ones who can reveal what a child's destiny will be. In non-Christian contexts the shaman may prescribe the right rituals that may be demanded in order to avert an undesirable life of suffering. Because the prosperity and future wellbeing of the family is dependent upon their offspring, it is believed to be important that everything that was needed was done in order to guarantee a favorable destiny, including a secret visit to the shaman, if necessary.

Spells

African societies, which are oral by nature, regard the spoken word as having the power to bless or curse. Curses are therefore feared and are avoided at all costs because they can precipitate death or sorrow (Mbiti 1991:118). Besides spells, which may be placed on a victim by a person of power, such as a shaman, another kind of curse which is dreaded and believed to lead to suffering is an ancestral curse. Ancestral curses may be due to the misdeeds or faults of a person's forebears, which can result in a life of misery and hardship for later generations. Among Pentecostals today a lot of the struggling and suffering Christians experience is attributed to generational curses with allusions made to the Pentateuch for biblical support (Exod 20:5; 34:7; Num 14:8; Deut 5:9).

Having briefly outlined some of the major explanations for suffering from the African standpoint, it needs to be stated that for the practice of dual allegiance to be corrected, it will be important that fresh explanations be given for the circumstance of suffering (Kraft 2008:355, 356). Such explanations should adequately respond to the source or cause of suffering and present a person with a purpose and plan to resolve the problem, which is what theodicy is all about.

Suffering in Scripture

The most coherent explanation for the existence and nature of suffering can be found in the Scriptures. In the Genesis account a perfect world

unblighted by sin or suffering is what was created by God. It is not until the third chapter of the book, with the entrance of the devil into Eden and the disobedience of Adam and Eve, that sin and its tragic consequences are introduced into a pristine, perfect world. Hence it can be adduced that suffering is the result of sin, and a consequence of wrong choices. While the injudicious choices of Adam and Eve opened the door for sin, giving it resident status on this planet, it is however the flawed personal choices of individuals that are responsible for personal and communal sorrow such as addictions, genocide, war, abortions, and poverty (Prov 26:2; Rom 1:20; 6:23).

Suffering in the Old Testament

Beginning with the entrance of sin into the world, the trail of human suffering can be traced to the end of Scripture. A survey of the heroes and heroines in the Bible reveals familiarity with suffering. In other words, a special relationship with God provides no immunity from suffering. Righteous Abel was slain by his rebellious brother Cain. Noah suffered rejection and scorn as he warned his world about God's coming judgment. Abraham went through the emotional agony of knowing he would have to slay his son in three days, although he had waited to have that child for decades. Moses, the slave raised in the palace, agonized as he saw his own people mistreated, but suffered even more when rejected as their deliverer. He had to live for four decades as a vagabond and exile in the desert of Midian. He again suffered through the rebellion of the Israelites as he led them out of exile. Israel's captivity for four centuries is another object lesson in suffering for God's people. The history of the Bible prophets is one that is replete with privation and rejection, while some were killed. And Jeremiah, writer of the book of Lamentations, is best known as the weeping prophet.

Perhaps no other section of Scripture portrays human suffering with more pathos than the laments in the Psalms. The book of Job is unparalleled in its depiction of the grand theme of theodicy.

Suffering in the New Testament

The New Testament breaks forth with the cry of lament, as Herod attempts to secure his throne by genocide—the mass killing of infant boys. Suffering clouds the path of Jesus from the cradle to the cross. Before his crucifixion, Christ predicted that his followers would walk the same course as he walked and experience afflictions, tribulations, rejections, and ultimately death. He also informed the disciples that they would have the poor with them always, implying that suffering would continue until the end of time (Matt 26:11).

The Apostles rejoiced when they experienced the predicted sufferings, while Paul gloried that his life could be characterized by a fellowship of suffering with Christ (Phil 3:10). In no way do the writers of the epistles give the impression that Christians should expect anything other than a life of suffering for the cause of Christ. Revelation, the last book of the Bible also echoes the refrain of suffering in the form of martyrdom, from the first to the last century of Christian history (Rev 2:9-13; 12:17; 18:24). Paul introduced an eschatological dimension to suffering when he stated that even the creation groans in expectation of the day of the Lord (Rom 8:18-25).

The reality of human suffering has been demonstrated throughout biblical history, and it continues even to this day for Christians. Scripture, however, does not only present the reality of suffering, but it also provides deliverance and salvation from this common human experience.

Suffering and the Savior

Christianity, unlike other world religions, presents a Savior whose mission was to deal with the root cause of human suffering—sin (John 1:29). The incarnation was predicated upon the desire of the Creator to redeem his creatures and identify with them in their suffering. Christ experienced the full spectrum of human suffering during his earthly ministry. Born into poverty (Luke 2:4-7), he labored as a carpenter (Matt 13:55), experienced the fiercest temptations Satan could muster against him (Matt 4:1-11; 26:36-46), was hungry and thirsty (John 4), tired (Mark 4:37-38), falsely accused (Matt 26:59-61), stalked (Luke 20), shamed (John 8:39-41), and finally was subjected to the worst kind of suffering—the cross. The writer of Hebrews underscores Christ's empathizing identification with humans through his life and death in order to demonstrate the fact that we are never alone in our suffering (Heb 4:14-16).

Suffering and Spirituality

Could there be a purpose in suffering? Every worldview seeks to provide meaning or find a purpose for suffering. This quest for meaning is the underlying feature of the universal question, "Why?" (Emerson 1986:56). While it is clear from the creation narrative that God is not the author of suffering, yet there is evidence he does transform the problem by giving it an edifying purpose. James A. Saunders is cited as providing eight answers to the problem of suffering in the Old Testament—that sufferings are retributive, disciplinary, relational, probational, illusory (transitory), mysterious, eschatological, and meaningless (in Luyten 1990:2). A beneficial spiritual purpose can be found for suffering in the Old

Testament books of Genesis, Job, and Ezekiel, where suffering is regarded as being administered by God for purification and trial (Gen 22; Ezek 22:20-22; Job 33:14-33; 36:8-15) (20, 21). Another benefit suffering fosters is a new understanding of God, as demonstrated in the experience of Job after his trials (Job 42:5) (Emerson 1986:48). Similarly, spiritual maturation is a by-product of the experience of suffering (Michiels 1990:31). Other passages in Scripture which support the thesis that suffering can enhance a Christian's spiritual experience are Jas 5:10, 11, 13 and 1 Pet 5:7. In other words, through suffering Christians can grow in faith, patience, and experience and draw closer in fellowship with Christ.

Suffering and Sovereignty

As with theodicy and the problem of evil, suffering reveals the enigma of the sovereignty of God. Suffering showcases the inscrutable purposes of the Almighty God. For instance, Joseph, sold by his brothers into slavery, explained that what they intended for evil, God had turned around for their good and the deliverance of many lives (Gen 50:20). When Habakkuk complained about the evils and injustices of his day he was reminded that God as Sovereign is in control of the universe in spite of the seeming chaos, confusion, and suffering of God's people.

In no other place in Scripture is the sovereignty of God more clearly depicted than in the book of Job. Job never gets to know the purpose for his suffering, yet as with the prophet Habakkuk, God "resituates the problem within the context of trust" (Liderbach 2012:23). Because suffering, like life, is a mystery that is almost totally incomprehensible, the natural response should be trust in the wisdom, power, and goodness of God.

God's submission is also contrasted with God's sovereignty. Scriptures reveal glimpses of the sovereignty of God and his voluntarily submission to experience the suffering of his creatures. On Mount Moriah, God gave Abraham a peek into the future and how he would surrender his only begotten Son to experience the suffering that would deliver humanity from the bondage and suffering sin had caused (Gen 22).

Suffering and the Adventist Worldview

A fundamental belief of the Adventist Church that engages the question of human suffering is the Great Controversy theme. It recognizes the fact that there is an ongoing cosmic conflict involving every living creature. This conflict between right and wrong, good and evil, God versus Satan, is graphically depicted in the book of Job (Liderbach 2012:25). In this battle, which began in heaven, Christ the commander-in-chief of the armies of heaven has always been triumphant. The most recent fundamental belief

of the church (“Growing in Christ”—belief number 11) acknowledges Christ’s victory and encourages members to appropriate its benefits in their lives and exercise authority over evil demonic forces and experience freedom from the fear of evil spirits and death. Consequently, Adventists have a biblical, eschatological, and coherent explanation for the spiritual conflict unfolding on earth that accounts for universal suffering.

Application: A Theology of Suffering

In response to the need for a theology of suffering that will foster single allegiance to Christ, a fresh teaching paradigm and method is demanded. This paradigm needs to harmonize with the biblical response to the problem of suffering, which is to tell the story of Jesus and reveal his presence in every situation of suffering. Lucien Richard states, “Christianity as a religious tradition does not argue against suffering nor does it proffer a solution: it tells the story of Jesus, the crucified and risen Lord” (1992:3). The problem may be that Christians have been trying too hard to explain the unexplainable and to give meaning to the incomprehensible. When asked why a certain man was born blind, Christ simply used the opportunity to demonstrate his compassion and change the man’s story (John 9:1-7). Also, when informed about those whose blood Pilate had mixed with sacrifices, Jesus in response told another story and made an appeal for his listeners to return to God in repentance (Luke 13:1-9). Is it not puzzling that after waiting until the closing chapters of the book for an explanation for the monumental sufferings of Job, all that God did was to simply retell the story of the wonder of creation, and pose new questions of his own (Job 38-41)? In other words, the why question remained unanswered.

It may be time to teach a theology of suffering with new methods by responding to new questions. Rather than attempting to definitively resolve what God himself has left unanswered, it may be time to change our responses. Since the “why” question of suffering is open-ended in nature, open to debate, and can only be resolved by the Almighty, perhaps it may be expedient instead to respond to the “where” question by speaking of the God who responds from the darkness and tumult of the whirlwind. The fitting response to the question “where is God in all this suffering” is that God, the Great I AM, is ever present with his children whether in the valley of slavery, or the agony of the cross on Mount Calvary; he is ever-present, only obscured by the shadow of the cross (Exod 3, Matt 27:45-54).

Blame is usually ascribed for personal suffering in the African context to someone or something else; an enemy, a spirit, a witch, or a curse. In teaching a theology of suffering in such contexts it needs to be clearly explained that while the biblical evidence clearly reveals the devil and his

minions actively at work in diverse forms in human experiences (Eph 2:2; 6; 11, 12; Col 1:21), human choices also play a significant role in personal and communal suffering (Gen 4:3, 4).

Although the typical contemporary response towards suffering is that of avoidance, the Scriptures in contrast teach its acceptance as a fact of human existence, and even suggest an audacious embrace of suffering because suffering can be transformative and result in God receiving glory (Rom 8:18; 1 Pet 4:12-15). Molly James advocates for a balanced approach between seeing suffering as an aberration and living with the tensions of suffering as a reality (2012:178). While Christians should not be found suffering due to their own crimes (1 Pet 4:15), the Psalmist demonstrates that God's presence in suffering can bring Christians comfort and confidence in their God (Lister 2013:250).

The feeling that one's suffering has no meaning or purpose can easily lead to despair and depression. However, through faith in Christ Christians should be taught that "all suffering can be fruitful in an apostolic way," and this should produce comfort rather than distress (Lambrecht 1990:67). The idea that Christians should never suffer should be refuted since the Scriptures unambiguously teach that Christians are engaged in a cosmic conflict (Eph 6; 2 Cor 10:3-5). Because God can use suffering for spiritual maturity and to strengthen the faith of his children suffering should not be looked at as altogether evil, since God can transform it into something useful to serve his purposes (Coulibaly 2006:585).

As Christians are taught a theology of suffering the focus from beginning to end should be centered on the cross of Christ, for believers can draw comfort from the suffering of Christ and thereby find grace to endure. In the history of the conflict between good and evil God has always been triumphant; in heaven, on earth, and all through the ministry of Christ. At the cross Christ openly triumphed over the hordes of evil (Rev 12; Col 2:15). As a theology of suffering is taught, Christians should be encouraged to know that every trial and affliction they face comes to them filtered by the certainty that the cross is the ultimate response to suffering and tempered by the grace of God. Furthermore, God has promised not to allow anyone to suffer more than they can bear. He also promises that he will give grace so that they shall not be overwhelmed (2 Cor 10:13).

Suffering, the result of evil and a by-product of sin is not good, but God is good. In spite of the quandary that suffering constitutes to the belief in the omnipotence and love of God, Scripture affirms that God is loving and good (1 John 4:8). While no one may have all the answers, what the Bible teaches about suffering is that no matter the source, cause, or nature, God is good, and is ever-working to alleviate human suffering and woes. He invites his children to join in this work, recognizing that whatever

challenges of life or whatever the devil may send their way, God is in control and will ultimately cause everything to work for the good of those surrendered to his cause (Rom 8:32).

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