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Volume 3 – 2011

“But that the Works of God Should be Made Manifest in Him” (John 9:3): How God wrestles with the Shortcomings of His People

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Abstract

Wrestling is a great sport that has attracted the old and young, men and women, and the rich and the poor. If one puts wrestling in the larger context, it is one of the sporting activities that have

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economically changed peoples' lives, especially in developed nations. Besides the positives, to the critics wrestling is not for the faint-hearted as it involves violent wrestling strategies for one of the contestant to win. The same strategies can be disturbing to pacifists. In that light, to talk of God's wrestling with the shortcomings of His people should make this article interesting when related to the day-to-day experiences of Christians in general and especially to Zimbabwean Christians in particular.

Can an individual wrestle with God and survive? Is it possible for God to wrestle with His creatures? In life, people struggle with the various challenges of life, and Christians are not an exception. For that struggle to be meaningful, people invoke God and His word in their search for solutions to their problems and challenges. How does God then "wrestle" with His creatures? This article critically looks at the challenges and questions that people have thereby leading God to wrestle with them over their shortcomings. A random sampling of fifty people was done in Harare, Zimbabwe, and the questionnaire at the end of this article was randomly distributed focusing on the shortcomings of people and what people think in relation to how God possibly "wrestles" with them in their weaknesses.

Introduction

How do you respond when your experience of life doesn't match with what you know to be true of God? How do you respond when your experience of life doesn't match with what you expect of God in life? I have met several faithful believers in Christ who have grappled with the following difficult questions, including this one: If there is neither male nor female in Christ (Gal. 3:28), why are most Churches still resisting the ordination of female ministers like their male counterparts? The resistance remains despite the fact that women constitute the majority of members in Church. Doesn't the presence of female ministers in the pulpit or at the Holy Table help symbolize the presence of a coming God who is beyond all distinctions between male and female?² But that is not the hardest or the only question. What is interesting today is that many people are advocating for equality, new life-styles, a proper partnership of both sexes and

² L. M. Russell, *Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective-A Theology* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1974), 47.

structures in Church and the broader society. Here are some other potent questions.

- ❖ What do you do when you know God loves the world and desires all people to be saved (1 Tim. 2:4), yet you see people all over the world suffering from famine, hunger, wars, poverty, floods, droughts, earthquakes and disasters?
- ❖ Why has poverty found a lasting friendship with many people? Why do many faithful believers in Christ or people sleep on an empty stomach whilst others have more than enough food to throw away?
- ❖ Why do innocent children get exposed to domestic violence and sexual abuse?
- ❖ Why do believing women who have prayed for God-fearing partner get married to violent and unfaithful men?

It is painful to realise that the majority of faithful women (though there are some men who also suffer) in the world suffer gender-based violence every second and have become prisoners in painful marriages.³ Some men and women have had the experience of looking after their families when the partner ran away from the violent relationship. In some cases, children end up choosing to live in the streets as orphans because of their violent parents who are always at each other's throat, and in some cases the innocent children are caught in between the fighting parents.

Further difficult questions linger in believers' minds like: Why does God allow preachers to molest innocent children in their churches and parents to sexually abuse their children?⁴ Abuse of

³ "Bulawayo man jailed for 7 years after making his wife feed on his poop for 3 days," www.myzimbabwe.com; accessed online 30 November 2012; see also, Ruth Butaumocho, "Gender violence: Zimbabwe must do more," www.newzimbabwe.com, accessed online, 17 November 2012; Ropafadzo Mapimhizhe, "Domestic violence most tolerated abuse," *NewsDay*, 14 October 2011; Vincent Gono, "Domestic violence on the increase," *Sunday News*, 03 December 2011; Wongai Zhangazha, "Women paying ultimate price," *The Independent*, 20 November 2012; Ropafadzo Mapimhizhe, "Why kill, maim someone you love?" *NewsDay*, 26 May 2012; Roselyne Sachiti, "Domestic Violence: A Human Right Issue," *The Herald*, 24 August 2012.

⁴ Tendai Kamhingira, "Pastor prays after raping a woman," *Daily News*, 27 September 2012; See also, Rudo Mapuranga, "Raped, Impregnated by pastor," *NewsDay*, 01 December 2012; "Harare Pastor rapes a seven year girl," *H-Metro*, 23 January 2012; Tendai Kamhingira, "Pastor faces multiple rape charges," *Dailynews*, 08 November 2012; "Pastor in court for raping a congregant," *The Chronicle*, 21 September 2012.

children has become rampant in African Apostolic sects where teenage girls are deprived of education and forced into marriages.⁵

Why would a loving husband or wife murder his or her partner?

Some have lost their loved ones in road accidents. Some accidents happen when people are going for or coming from spiritual conferences and prayer outreaches.

Why is life like that?⁶

It is such tragedies that lead people to ask the question, why did it happen to me or my family? Some have lost their only homes in infernos, lighting strikes or from storms that left them homeless for life. There are many orphans in the world. Furthermore, Zimbabwe is not an exception to that scourge due to the HIV and AIDS pandemic. As a result of the pandemic, a number of children are left without parents to fend for them and are forced by circumstances to stay in the streets to earn a living.

With all these questions in mind, let us ask how this applies to how God “wrestles” with us:

❖ Is it us wrestling with our projection of an ever loving God?

or

❖ Is it God wrestling with an ungrateful humanity?

Being angry at God is something that many people have experienced. Both believers and unbelievers at one time or the other have wrestled with being angry at God. When something tragic happens in our lives, we ask God the question, “Why?” It is a natural response.

What we are really asking Him, though, is not so much “Why, God?” but “Why *me*, God?” as if to imply that “God could have erred in His judgment.” However, is this the case with God? NO. William James may be understood from that position, when he asked the

⁵ F. Machingura, “A Diet of Wives as the Lifestyle of Vapostori Sects: The Polygamy Debate in the Face of HIV and AIDS in Zimbabwe,” *Africana Journal*, 5:2, 185-210; See also, G Nyazema, “Early Marriages: Girl Child’s Curse,” *Dailynews*, 14 October 2012; S Chiwanga, “Forced marriages still a reality in Zimbabwe,” *Sunday News*, 25 April 2012; “Stop minors’ marriages in apostolic Churches,” *Dailynews*, 13 November 2011; R Sachiti, “The Tragedy of Johane Marange’s child brides,” *The Herald*, 31 January 2011

⁶ “Pastors die in accidents,” *The Chronicle*, 20 January 2012; “Government, Church to launch traffic safety awareness,” *The Chronicle*, 01 November 2012; “Female ghost terrorises motorists,” *The Chronicle*, 22 June 2012; C Buckle, “Xmas journey from hell,” *Dailynews*, 28 December 2011; “Car Crash kills 10 family members,” *The Herald*, 11 November 2011; H Marizani, “Frequency of road accidents worrying,” *The Chronicle*, 01 November 2012.

following question: “Is the sense of divine presence a sense of anything objectively true?”⁷ Many believers have struggled with the same issues but don’t feel secure in telling someone about their frustrations.

First, many believers operate under the impression that life should always be easy and enjoyable. Their assumption is that, God must always be there to prevent any tragedy of life from happening. As a result, when God does not act according to believers’ expectations which they would have built on certain biblical texts, they get angry with God. Second, when Christian believers fail to understand the extent of God’s sovereignty or divine presence, they lose confidence and get confused on God’s ability to control circumstances. Critical believers get angry with God because they assume that God could have lost control of the universe, and especially control of their lives and ambitions.

Yet they forget that losing faith in God’s sovereignty is often due to their own frustrations and lack of control over their lives and events. J. Denison notes that,

In real life it’s hard to depend on someone who has disappointed you. It’s only natural to pull back, minimize your risk, cut your losses and decide not to let the person who hurt you hurt you again.⁸

People take real life experiences of frustrations and boredom against God. Challenges of life have resulted in believers asking the following questions: “why and where is God in all this?” Surprisingly for some people, when good things happen, they all too often attribute it to their own achievements and success. When bad things happen, they are quick to blame God and get angry with Him for not preventing it, which indicates the first flaw in people’s thinking, hence, God’s wrestling with His people. As a result one is forgiven to ask the following questions: one, is it, because people do not know what God requires of them; or, two, is it because people faultily and conditionally put programmes that God is expected to fulfil if He is to

⁷ Dean Hamer, *The God Gene: How Faith is Hardwired into Our Genes* (NY: Anchor Books, 2004), 197.

⁸ J. Denison, *Wrestling with God: How Can I love God I am not sure I trust?* (Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, 2008), IX.

relevantly remain God? Is it because believers wrongly interpret biblical texts to suit their own egos?

There are many incidences when I came across preachers quoting the biblical narrative of Jacob's wrestling with God as part of the encouragement for Christians to wrestle with God until their needs are fulfilled. Jacob is used as a model to Christians who are interested in making sure that God responds according to Christians' desires. Is that a good interpretation?

A. Jacob's Purported Wrestling with God (Genesis 32:28):

It's an amazing moment in the overall biblical story when Jacob (whose name originally means "deceiver") finally is said to have wrestled with God and won. Jacob didn't let go of his nocturnal assailant without a blessing before the coming dawn, and Jacob managed to get his blessing by using force. Jacob prevailed despite the injury inflicted on his thigh. Jacob's victory makes the whole narrative strange and difficult to understand. As a result, Jacob's importance to both Judaism and Christianity cannot be overlooked as his role as transmitter of a lineage and blessings to generations is believed to have been passed on to all generations of believers.⁹

This biblical story has been interpreted differently over history and by many Christians in Zimbabwe. Many literally interpret the biblical episode to suit their contexts. Some Old Testament scholars have dismissed the story as mythical and not supposed to be taken literally. According to J. Hayes, the significance of this episode is found in the etiologies which it incorporates like:

The origin of the name Israel is traced to this "event" since Jacob is blessed with a new name, "Israel," which is taken to mean "he strives with God" (or God strives). The name of the town Peniel near Jabbok is traced to Jacob's comment, "I have seen God (el) face (pan) to face." The wounding of Jacob's thigh is understood as the origin of the Israelite prohibition against eating the sciatic muscle of sacrificed animals. It may be that Jacob's limping once formed part of an etiology for a cultic limping dance (1 Kings 18:26).¹⁰

Gerhard von Rad adds that narratives about the Israelite ancestors found in Genesis 12 to 50 must be read in their context where they served as instruments and conveyors of the nation's theological

⁹ P. G. Jestic, *Holy People of the World: A Cross-Cultural Encyclopedia* (Vol. 1, USA: 2004), 413.

¹⁰ J. Hayes, *Introduction to the Bible* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1971), 53.

beliefs and cultural customs. Such stories served an etiological function and were meant to explain several things: the existence of customs, religious practices, sacred sites, natural phenomena and ethnic relationship which were part of the Israelite society.¹¹

For P. R. House, the name change is repeatedly mentioned by the author in Genesis 32:28 as a way of reminding Jacob of the divine election, the protection that are his (Gen. 35: 9-10) and the promise of nationhood (Gen. 35:11).¹²

Whether scholars take it as a myth, an etiological motif, or a legendary story, whatever, Jacob's story has a general relevance for contemporary Christians. Contemporary Christians are mostly not concerned about the meaning of the text in its context but its relevance and meaning when directed to believers' experiences and challenges today. The promises given to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are the same mandate given to mankind as long as they believe.¹³ Christians make claims based on the narrative of Jacob as predictive of them as believers.

Some Christians use the story of Jacob as their model of prayer where they swear that they will wrestle with God in prayer until what they aspire to have is granted. Arnold Chakanyuka noted:

When we read the Bible today, we want to hear God speaking to us and not what God said then to the named biblical figures and Israelites. The same God can still speak to us today through the biblical texts we have. Unfortunately God is not given His space as God."¹⁴

Such conservative statements by Christians are mostly found in Pentecostal Churches. They mostly use the language of the Psalms to form their wrestling prayers (Ps. 18:6 "in my distress I called upon the Lord; to my God I cried for help"; 120:1 "In my distress I cry to the Lord, that he may answer me"; 18:5; 42:7; 139:7; 5:7; 69:2; 30:3; 142:3; 18:6 again; and 3:8) in the midst of tribulations, suffering and despair.¹⁵ God is invoked in all circumstances that Christians find in

¹¹ Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1961), 54.

¹² P. R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (USA: Intervarsity Press, 1998), 81.

¹³ T. Hale and S. Thorson, *The Applied Old Testament Commentary: Applying God's Word to your Life* (London: Thomas Hale, 2007), 182.

¹⁴ Arnold Chakanyuka interviewed on 28 October, 2012.

¹⁵ "Is it wrong to be angry with God?," see www.gotquestions.org/angry-with-God.html, accessed online, 10 October 2012.

bad taste; even circumstances where they are to blame. R. Reno notes that,

Jacob struggled with God for the future covenant that all believers will use to be blessed. Jacob mastered God by way of ardent and unceasing prayer. Jacob's example must be followed by all Christians to secure God's blessing. With tireless petition we should 'assault' God to win his favour, as did the Canaanite woman with her determined efforts to win the favour of Jesus (Mt. 15:21-28) and the widow did with her persistent demand for justice (Lk. 18:1-8).¹⁶

I once attended a Sunday Service at one of the Pentecostal Churches in Harare. The pastor gave reference to Jacob and vowed to his Christian listeners that:

If you're struggling with life at the moment, think of Jacob's resilience to keep on fighting till he won the battle. If you're wrestling with your faith in Jesus, if you're fighting to understand how your experience of life connects with the God who has revealed himself in the Bible, then don't give up! Keep wrestling until you get your blessing like Jacob.¹⁷

The case of Jacob is made meaningful and relevant by not focusing on his weaknesses or chequered lifestyle but on his ability to wrestle all night against an angel (who is taken as representative of God) so as to accomplish his dreams of getting blessed. The context of the biblical texts is ignored and the focus is on the meaning and relevance in peoples' lives, for example, in the face of tragedies. It is also important to note that wrestling with God might not be a problem as long as we understand and give space to His sovereign power and grace towards humanity.

B. The Sovereign Power of God's Grace towards Humanity

Tragedies bring home the awful truth that we are not in charge but that God holds complete authority and power over the world he has created. All of us think at one time or another that we can control our situations, yet it is God who is in charge of all creation. Everything that happens is either caused by or allowed by God. We can be angry with God for many reasons but we also need to accept at some point that, there are things we cannot control or understand with our finite minds. Our understanding on the sovereignty of God in all

¹⁶ R. R. Reno, *Genesis: Brazo theological Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Brazo Press, 2010), 246.

¹⁷ Pastor S Ndhlovu (Not his real name) interviewed on 25 October 2012.

circumstances must be accompanied by our understanding of God's other attributes: love, sovereign power, generous, presence, mercy, kindness, goodness, righteousness, justice, and holiness. We see our difficulties through the truth of God's Word which tells us that our loving and holy God works all things together for our good (Romans 8:28) and that He has a perfect plan and His purpose for us cannot be thwarted (Is. 14:24, 46:9-10). Life will never be one of continual joy and happiness. There are incidences when life seems to be hopeless yet God fashions it in a meaningful way. Job realistically reminds people that "For affliction does not come from the dust, nor does trouble sprout from the ground; man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward" (Job 5:6-7) and that life is short and "full of trouble" (Job 14:1). Christian believers and non-believers try to create explanations on the different challenges that they meet but without ever getting helpful solutions. We live in a fallen and imperfect world that often takes along with it innocent victims. Augustine tried to give his side of the story on imperfection when he argued that:

The present state of human nature is thus not what it is intended to be by God. The created order no longer directly corresponds to the "goodness" of its original integrity.¹⁸

If one looks at the level of evil in the world, one wonders what really is on God's mind. It is possible that, the present human nature makes God wrestle with His creatures in a bid to save them. Critics consider it unjust for God to have allowed tragedies to happen. As a result God ends up wrestling with His creatures to save them from danger and disobedience.

The level of poverty, unemployment, disease doesn't imply that God does not love. Being a faithful believer in Christ is not a guarantee that life will be free from problems like: injustices, police brutality, hunger, poverty, inadequate healthcare resulting in ill-health, challenges faced by people living with disability, oppressive regimes and persecution. Poverty, disability and sickness are not a sign that one is a sinner as implied by some Pentecostal Church pastors in Zimbabwe. It is unfortunate that people living with disabilities have always been made to think that, they are cursed and

¹⁸ A. E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1994), 22.

that they need to be extra prayerful for a miracle to take place. F. Young argues that:

The Bible can be very threatening to people with disabilities and their families: it seems full of miracle-stories, which can either raise unreasonable hopes, which are then constantly dashed, or make you feel very angry and excluded. Besides that, it encourages other people to tell you that if you only had enough faith you could be cured, and so make you feel inadequate. Even worse is the use of the Bible to suggest that impairment is a punishment for some wrongdoing.¹⁹

When I interviewed Tendai Matarutse on her challenges as a believer living with disability; she had this to say:

On your question, is it possible to wrestle with God and survive. I find it interesting because I have wrestled with God so many times as a result of my condition as a person living with disability. Preachers make me feel God does not love poor people let alone disabled people like us. Why does God allow us to be abused by preachers and not take action especially when they say: You are not healed because of the lack of faith? The God I know and trust never meant you to be in this state. Whenever I go to Church I am left devastated as every preacher or believer wants to parade their bigger faith on us and some go the extent of trying to perform miracles on us. If a miracle fails to make me walk, they blame me.²⁰

It is such challenges and questions that portray the ambiguities and inconsistencies that one finds when reading the Bible and how this impinges on believers' faith. Did God create some people to live with their disability or not? If there are bound to be people who will have to bear with their disability for life; then God should be wrestling with certain believers' views that 'being disabled implies one needs to be saved from that condition'.

In the African culture just like the Jewish culture, any form of disability in the family results in the blame being put on the parents or forefathers for committing a sin that resulted in the descendants' curse. This possibly was the assumption behind the question raised by the disciples of Jesus when they saw a man who was blind from his birth. Jesus' disciples said to him:

¹⁹ F. Young, *Being Biblical, Being Broken and Blessed*, accessed online 26 November 2012; see www.smitf.org/wp-content/uploads/beingbibli_calbrokenandblessed.pdf.

²⁰ Tendai Matarutse (Not her real name) interviewed on 19 November 2012.

Master, who did sin between this man or his parents, that he was born blind? Jesus answered, “Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him” (John 9:1–3).

For Jesus, it was not because this man sinned or that his parents sinned that he was born blind. It was the disciples’ conviction that, the problems that the blind man had were a result of man’s sin, which in some cases is correct. But notice what Jesus said in the third verse: “Neither has this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him.” If one becomes a believer, will troubles or problems vanish as taught by certain Christian groupings? Jesus seem to query that when he stated in the gospel of John that: “In this world you will have trouble” despite the fact that Jesus had “overcome the world” (John 16:33); storms will still rage around us (John 14:27). Pastor Simango of Life Ministries International is right to say that:

When tragedies happen to us, we know God can use them to bring us closer to Him and to strengthen our faith, bringing us to maturity and completeness (Psalm 34:18; James 1:2-4). Then, we can be a comforting testimony to others (2 Corinthians 1:3-5). Anger at God is a result of an inability or unwillingness to trust God even when we do not understand what He is doing. Anger at God is essentially telling God that He has done something wrong, which He never does. Does God understand when we are angry, frustrated, or disappointed with Him? Yes, He knows our hearts and He knows how difficult and painful life in this world can be. Does that make it right to be angry with God? Instead of being angry with God, we should pour out our hearts to God in prayer and then trust that He is in control and that His plan is perfect.²¹

Challenges of life come and go but God is always in charge. I interviewed thirty Christians (in Harare, in Zimbabwe) who raised pertinent issues that dawn on believers’ minds in relation to: the corruption that cuts across the political and religious divide in Zimbabwe, the violence that characterises our elections in Zimbabwe, growing number of gender based violence, abuse of innocent children by their parents, the level of poverty and sickness that rule the lives of Zimbabweans. Some Christians though they have higher degrees and have done everything that qualifies one for resounding success yet success remains elusive because of their disobedient children,

²¹ Pastor Simango interviewed on 18 September, 2012.

unstable marriages, high levels of divorce and sicknesses.²² What is realistically painful today is that Christians divorce at the same rate as the rest of the population and their moral lives have become no different from non-believers. One wonders whether Christians actually practice what the Bible says or believe in the meaning of the hymns they sing at Christian gatherings. Corruption has reached unprecedented levels in Zimbabwe and it's not surprising the majority of people involved in corrupt activities are Christians. Corruption in most nations particularly in Africa has become a method of wealthy distribution amongst the elite rich and powerful at the expense of the poor.²³ As a result some people have taken their own lives because life has become meaningless by being unemployed for several years even after having attained professional skills. Some are HIV positive but they are still not able to access the Antiretroviral (ARVs) drugs. According to Tendai Musukutwa:

What is painful for us as married women is when we who are HIV positive allegedly get accused of the following: when brethren rush to accuse the HIV positive woman as responsible for bringing the disease in the home. Either you are suspected of having being immoral or having failed to handle your marriage properly leading the man to look for other women. At Church, some brethren and pastors accuse us of not being prayerful enough to fend off the spirits of immorality that possessed our husbands. Some go to the extent of accusing us of lacking faith or not paying Tithes hence not being healed from HIV and AIDS. HIV and AIDS is interpreted as a demonic disease that needs prayer to be healed. As a result of facing these challenges of rejection from families and the Church, we end up viewing God as having really punished us. The only option for us to be free from shame is by committing suicides.²⁴

As a result, much damage has been done in the Church by well-meaning people who address suffering using Scriptures like platitudes. The question is that, is this happening according to God's plan? If it is not according to plan, isn't God wrestling with humanity in general and Zimbabweans in particular to right these evils?

²² D. K. Olukoya, Wrestling with shadows, accessed online, 06 October 2012.

See www.mountainoffire.org/fitw/wrestling_with_shadows.html.

²³ F. Machingura, *The Messianic Feeding of the Masses: An Analysis of John 6 in the Context of Messianic Leadership in Post-Colonial Zimbabwe* (Bamberg: Bamberg University Press, 2012), 244 & 295.

²⁴ Tendai Musukutwa (not her real name) interviewed on 10 November 2012.

C. Where Is the Love of God in This?

The level of absolute poverty, endemic corruption, civil wars and the level of violence that characterise the world today have led people to question the mind of God in all these evils. Unfortunately it is the poor who bear the brunt of the manifestations of such evils. What comes to mind is the status of the poor in Africa who clearly constitute the majority. In fact it is the poor whose souls get auctioned for a few kilograms of rice, beans, roller meal to give away their votes to corrupt leaders who forget them when elections are over. Some have broken marriages, illegitimate children (father of the child is not known) and broken family relationships as a result of the sexual and political violence that took place during elections. Isn't God wrestling against the shortcomings of his people when some of these atrocities are committed by people who purport to be Christians? Is God disturbed when Christians violently attack their brethren in Christ as in the case of the Anglican Church in Zimbabwe?²⁵ The irony of it is that, the Church that is supposed to lead in reconciling people is the one that needs to be reconciled first. Some of the perpetrators of corruption and violence in Zimbabwe hold positions of authority in Church. Mrs. Makuvaza, an Apostolic Faith Mission deaconess, who was a victim of rape during the 2008 elections, had this to say:

Have you ever looked into somebody's eyes that have faced sexual abuse or violence that left him/her with broken limbs? Have you ever tried engaging the soul of a once vibrant woman who is utterly crushed and hopeless? Have you ever truly listened to a heart with barely enough strength to cry out for justice but still looking to the heavens for help and justice to come? Why does God allow Christians to be raped without giving them comfort during the horrible experience? How would you feel having a child after being violently raped by five men? Where is the Love of God in all this? When will God revenge or vindicate us against our persecutors?²⁶

In this case of the wounded woman, the pain is severe and in her eyes God is taking His time to fight for her. How could she have the

²⁵ "Police assist Anglicans Regain Churches," *Dailynews*, 03 December, 2012; See also, D. Nemukuyu and E Taadira, "Anglican Row turns violent," *Herald*, 01 December 2012; "Archbishop harassed," *Dailynews*, 11 October 2011; "Kunonga ordered to stop violence," *Dailynews*, 11 October 2011; "Nuns harassed after Archbishop's visit," *The Zimbabwean*, 12 October, 2011; "Hired Thugs' attack Anglicans in Mutare," 26 October 2011; "Shamu bemoans power struggles in the Church," *Herald*, 13 December 2009.

²⁶ Mrs. Makuvaza (Not her real name), AFM Deaconess, interviewed on 29 August, 2012.

courage to try God one more time? Such questions though portraying some wrestling taking place in peoples' minds against God testify something about the attitude of believers towards God when in pain.

God-fearing people battle with the lingering pain for years without any sign of vindication, healing, justice and closure of the pain. J. Cone was right to say "there can be no reconciliation with God unless the hungry are fed, the sick are healed and justice is given to the poor".²⁷ I have met people in my interviews, particularly the youth who always say,

If there is a God who is loving and merciful, how come there is so much suffering, hunger and death amongst the poor. In most cases, it is the poor who are always exposed to primitive diseases like typhoid and cholera. Why are the poor so many? Why is it that the poor are so religious when compared to the rich? Isn't belief in God some form of optimism or idiocy? When tragedies, civil wars befall a nation, it is always the poor who get affected? Where is God in all this? Why is it that these things occur?

These questions linger in many people's minds but it does always mean that they question the existence of God when they ask such questions. It also does mean that, their faith in God is misplaced. What it confirms is that, the youth interrogate their conditions of life as not tenable and if poverty is as a result of corrupt leaders, we expect God to intervene for the sake of the voiceless poor and weak.

I suppose there is more pain and suffering today than ever leading people to wrestle with God for answers. Not only is there more physical, emotional and mental pain than there has ever been. Why does God 'allow' evil to dominate believers' lives and innocent souls to suffer? Is this sin and suffering, a generational curse? There are many incidences when believers try to improvise their way out of pain and problems. According to J. Clayton:

Sometimes it takes pain, sometimes it takes suffering, and sometimes it takes a tragedy to make us realize that we need God. Pain humbles us and makes us appreciate the power of God.²⁸

Paul accepts the role that pain can play in the lives of believers and in some cases the devil seeking to discourage believers putting their

²⁷ J. Cone, "Black Theology and Reconciliation," *Christianity and Crisis*, XXXII:24, 1973, 307.

²⁸ J Clayton, "The Problem of Human Suffering," accessed online 23 September 2012, seen at www.doesgodexist.org/Pamphlets/ProblemOfHumanSuffering.html.

faithful trust in God. Does it mean contemporary Christians should accept whatever pain that comes to their lives even in the case of a government that would have failed to give the expected services to its people? In 2 Corinthians 12:7, Paul said, “Lest I should be exalted above measure, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure.” The apostle Paul apparently had a problem. However, Paul uses the figurative language of the ‘thorn’ to refer to some form of continuing or recurring aggravation and hindrances to his gospel mission. The traditional view is that, he was referring to his sinful past when he wrestled against God’s salvific mission.²⁹ G. C. Bray and J. M. Scott think that, Paul was referring to the persecutions he had often suffered, for example, the plots that were going on behind his back. Paul used this to make it clear that, God’s power is made perfect in persecutions and sufferings.³⁰ Faith is established when some infirmities and desolations attack us. The pain and suffering (the thorn in the flesh, whatever it was) helped Paul to continually trust and uphold God. It helped him overcome any sense of egotism that might have been part of his life. For Paul, it is possible to see the growing sense of God’s love even in times of suffering, poverty, pain, hunger and sickness.

D. “A Christian Is Not Supposed to Suffer”: The Pentecostal Slogan

There are some, for example, who think that pain is something that should not occur if there is a God. And yet, physical pain and other types of pain are absolutely necessary if we are to survive in this road to life after death. I have come across several Christians in Zimbabwe who always say:

My brother, if your relationship with God is fine, you are not supposed at all to have problems. If you face problems like hunger, poverty, being unemployed and falling sick; it means that you are not prayerful. Why would Christians have ulcers or catch diseases if they have not sinned? Why would God allow faithful hearted Christians to go hungry, fall sick and be poor? That will never happen as long as one is righteous before God.

²⁹ W. R. Baker, *2 Corinthians* (USA: College Press Publishing Company, 1999), 430.

³⁰ G. C. Bray, *1-2 Corinthians* (USA: Intersity Press, 1999), 299; J M Scott, *2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 179.

The irony of it is that, most Christians think that way and don't seem to have problems with the pain they cause on their brethren who have come across such challenges though they are faithful Christians who put their utmost trust in God. Part of the problem lies in the way people focus on the selected bits of the Bible without noticing that what it seems to say in one place is challenged or corrected in another.³¹ So there's the problem of fitting different texts together, but there's also the problem of interpretation.³² The Bible is a very complex collection of different books by different authors produced over many different centuries; a record of people encountering God, falling short of God's glory, finding salvation in all kinds of different ways. In that sense it's a human book full of human testimony. However, it is also a medium through which God speaks to us on important issues of life. What some Christians forget to realise is that:

What made the message of the early church radical was not that all pain and suffering would someday be removed. What made the message of the early church radical was that they actually embraced suffering in the present and somehow were actually empowered by it. But somehow, in the midst of persecution, the early Christians embraced pain in a way that strangled its power over their lives.³³

Yet the Pentecostal Gospel of prosperity has given the impression that “suffering is not part of the life of a Christian,” but rather it is heathens or people's own standing with God that is not right. Sometimes it takes a tragedy, persecution, hunger, success, prosperity and poverty to make us realize we are not self-sufficient. M. G. Easton argues that:

Afflictions are common to all (Job 5:7; 14:1, Ps. 34:19); are for the good of men (James 1:2-3; 2 Cor. 12:7) and the glory of God (2 Cor. 12:7-10; 1 Pet. 4:14) and are to be borne with patience by the Lord' people (Prov. 3:12). Afflictions

³¹ F. Machingura, *Pastoral Care and the Gospel of Prosperity: A Critical Look at the Zimbabwean Pentecostal Churches*, in J Pock, U Bechmann, *Pastoral und Geld* (Wien: GmbH and Company, 2011), 209-230; See also, F. Machingura, “The Reading and Interpretation of Matthew 18:21-22 in relation to Multiple Reconciliations: The Zimbabwean Experience,” *Exchange: Journal of Missiological and Ecumenical Research*, 39: 4, 2012, 331-354.

³² F. Young, *Being Biblical, Being Broken and Blessed*, accessed online 26 November 2012; see www.smitf.org/wp-content/uploads/beingbibli_calbrokenandblessed.pdf.

³³ *Wrestling with God in prayer*, accessed online 18 October 2012, see <http://perichoreticlife.blogspot.com/2012/07/wrestling-with-god-in-prayer.html>.

are all directed by God (Lam. 3:33) and will result in the everlasting good of his people (2 Cor. 4:16-18) in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:35-39).³⁴

Sometimes it takes a disease to make us realize that no matter how much money we have, no matter how vocal we are, no matter how many friends we have, no matter what our situation in life might be, there is no one who can help us but God. R. Bultmann was right to postulate that the Christian's life is ever threatened by danger as long as he or she still lives 'in the world' and 'in the flesh.'³⁵

The Early Church's message of "taking up one's cross and following Jesus or sharing in Jesus' suffering" has few takers in the Pentecostal understanding of salvation. If becoming a Christian would automatically unravel all the various problems that confront a person in life, then we would have people flocking to Christianity to get away from their problems. God wants us to serve Him because we love Him, not out of fear. That understanding on the sovereignty and power of God helps us not to wrestle with God. It would be unreal and unrealistic for us to really believe that somehow being a Christian ought to exempt us from the problems that other people have to endure.³⁶ The prosperity gospel has resulted in some Christians devising ways of seeking for riches big time and the end result is that, respectable Christians have committed crimes so as to accumulate wealth. All is done so as to be seen to be righteous and blessed by God thereby forcing God to wrestle with His creatures on the right principles that make humanity righteous.

Conclusion

This paper sought to show how the shortcomings of people result in God wrestling with them in a bid to graciously save them. Challenges of life force people to have questions about the sovereign power of God and such challenges also influence the believers' perspectives and interaction with the Bible. Different groups (women, children, persons living with disability, poor) in societies still look forward to God's liberation because they look at human liberation from their particular contexts. Human challenges will never change

³⁴ M. G. Easton, *Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (NY: T. Nelson and Sons, 2005), 23.

³⁵ R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 1951), 171.

³⁶ J. Clayton, *The Problem of Human Suffering*, accessed online 23 September 2012, see at www.doesgodexist.org/Pamphlets/ProblemOfHumanSuffering.html.

the status of God as God. God's wrestling with peoples' shortcomings will continue as long as the freedoms that He expects of His people are not witnessed by every living being.

Questionnaire

1. What is your understanding of wrestling?
2. Do you like wrestling as sport?
 - a) If NO, Why?
 - b) If YES, Why?
3. Is it possible for an individual to wrestle with God and survive?
 - a) If NO, why not?
4. If YES, Why and How does God then wrestle with His creatures?
 - a) How can people avoid wrestling with God?



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