

IGWEBUIKE PHILOSOPHY IN BIBLICAL CONTEXT AND THE INTERPRETATION OF HUMAN SUFFERING

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Abstract

Whenever we find ourselves in a precarious situation as the case is today vis-à-vis the rising wave of insecurity in Nigeria which manifests itself in different forms ranging from Boko Haram insurgency, kidnapping, herders-farmers conflict, armed banditry, violent cult activities, etc. These security challenges, occasioned by leadership failure, massive corruption all together constitute a disturbing trend in Nigeria's development process. As a consequent, we are left with 'man made' human suffering. Faced with such problem of evil and human suffering, the most natural and spontaneous thing that have continued to arise in the minds of men and women of various generations and classes are to look up to God for divine intervention with questions such as: Why does God permit wickedness? Is this just the way things supposed to be? Is the earth always being lived in, in accordance to God's will? These questions, no doubt, border on the origin, cause, purpose, etc., of human suffering and its interpretation. While these questions continue to arise in the minds of scholars even in the contemporary era, this work is interested, in providing a biblical, philosophical and pragmatic interpretation to human suffering, and how to help those who are victims to accept that it has some eschatological proportions. Although several approaches have been taken to explain and interpret human suffering, this work, however, adopts an Igwebuiké philosophical method of pragmatic and wholistic approach. It sees the different approaches to the problem of human suffering as dimensions of the whole, which, as individuals do not provide a wholistic solution to the problem of human suffering, however, when placed within the realm of theology, it provides that sense of fulfillment and everlasting contentment.

Keywords: Igwebuiké Philosophy, Wholistic Response, Theological Interpretation, Problem of Evil, Human Suffering, Insecurity, Wickedness

Introduction

The question of suffering has been puzzling to people almost from the beginning of time. The Old Testament Book of Job is an attempt to answer some of these

questions. If God is all good, and there is no evil in Him, does it mean that Satan is more powerful than God? Absolutely not! Of course, Satan is a powerful creature as he was once one of the most beautiful and intelligent of the angels, but he lost his way when he chose to rebel and tried to usurp the power that belongs to God alone. God will always be God from eternity to eternity, while Satan is still a created being (Bazza: 2013). The problem of evil and human suffering on the other hand, is the great *enigma vitae*, the solution of which, forever attempted, may forever baffle the human mind (Strahan 1913). And as far back as the 6th century BC, the question of the problem of evil and human suffering had burdened the heart of man; answers to such questions were sought through mythology (Kanu: 2017).

In Western philosophy, this burden can be noticed even in the 4th century BC in Epicurus, the founder of Epicureanism. Hume (1947) in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* puts the following words into the mouth of Philo, "Epicurus' old questions are yet unanswered. Is he [Deity] willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?" (p. 243). Even more agitating, is the mystery of suffering, or to put it more precisely, the mystery of unjust suffering (Gordis: 1965). During the medieval era, the idea of an infinitely good God and the presence of evil in the universe disturbed Augustine (Omoregbe: 1991).

Whence then is evil? He asked, what is its origin? How did it steal into the world? What is the root or seed from which it grew? Can it be that there is simply no evil? Whence then does evil come if God made all things, and because he is good made them good too? (Confessions, p. 138).

In the Confessions, Book Seven, the energy and passion with which Augustine pursued an answer to this question is further revealed:

I anxiously sought the answer to the question, 'Where does evil come from?' How great were the pangs of my overflowing heart, what inward groans I had, my God! Yet even then Your ears were open to me, though I did not know it. When in silence I vehemently sought an answer, those silent sorrows of my soul were strong cries to Your mercy, (p. 164).

While these questions continue to arise in the minds of scholars, this work is interested, not in the origin of human suffering, but on how to help mankind cope with human suffering by drawing strength from biblical examples. Several approaches have been taken to explain and help human suffering (Kanu 2017), this work, however, adopts an *Igwebuike* philosophical method of pragmatic and wholistic approach. The method views the different approaches to the problem of human suffering as dimensions of the whole, which, as individuals do not provide a wholistic solution to the problem of human suffering. However, when placed within the realm of theology, it provides that sense of fulfillment and everlasting contentment. In order to tackle the statement of the problem of this discourse adequately, the first step this research would take is to study and interpret from the perspective of the Bible, the different reasons why human beings suffer at all, since we were told at the summit of creation that: "God saw all that he had made and it was very good..." (Genesis 3:31).

Why do human beings suffer?

One of the greatest puzzles for many people is why God allows good people to suffer. What is the benefit, many asked, of trying to live according to God's instructions if we all have to suffer? A best-selling book states the dilemma in its title: *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. The book of 1 Peter deals specifically with the suffering of believers. Peter understood the significance of the suffering of people who live righteously in the light of Jesus Christ and His suffering. Here, Peter notes two categories of suffering. One is for righteousness' sake and brings us nearer to the kingdom of God. The other is largely unnecessary because it is usually the result of problems we bring on ourselves. We earnestly need God's help, however, during both types of suffering.

Experience for instance, reveals that Christians generally, like the thought of sharing in Christ's glory, but what about sharing in His suffering? Jesus took care of the death penalty once and for all so we don't ever have to worry about that again. But the Bible teaches us that we must suffer times of trial if we are to share in the glory. Is it worth it? Here is what Paul says: "...For I consider that the sufferings of this present life are not worth being compared with the glory that is about to be revealed to us and in us and for us and conferred on us" (Rom. 8:18).

Acting right when things are wrong

Many people think they suffer because of their circumstances. They believe that if their circumstances would change, they would be able to act right. But God

wants us to become so mature and stable that we act right even when none of our circumstances are good. There are different levels of faith and most of the time we want to use our faith to get rid of a problem. But sometimes God's plan is for us to exercise a higher level of faith that will carry us through life's challenges. This requires even greater faith than being delivered from situations (Bazza: 2013). Too often, we marvel at the delivering power of God and overlook His keeping, strengthening and enabling power. Although there are many reasons why people suffer, in this paper, focus would be on the eight most common reasons why there is suffering in human lives.

1) For lack of knowledge

Many people suffer because they are too busy seeking carnal knowledge instead of the Word of God. The Lord Himself said: "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge..." (Hosea 4:6). Paul was an educated man with a wealth of carnal knowledge. When he realized the importance of spiritual knowledge, he said: "...I resolved to know nothing, to be acquainted with nothing, to make a display of the knowledge of nothing, and to be conscious of nothing among you except Jesus Christ (the Messiah) and Him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). Like Paul, we need to realize the importance of spiritual things, for Galatians 6:8 says: "...he who sows to his own flesh (lower nature, sensuality) will from the flesh reap decay and ruin and destruction, but he who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life".

2) Disobedience hinders God's blessings

Once we know the Word of God, we have a responsibility to be obedient to it. Too many of us intend to be obedient, but put it off. Even procrastination is disobedience, and it can cause us to suffer. James in his epistle gives us a good advice: "Submit yourselves therefore, to God" (4:7). When God tells us to do something, we find it helpful to write it down. This serves as a reminder that we must be obedient if we want God's blessings. "If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land" (Isaiah 1:19).

3) Purify and Test your Faith

Sometimes people seem surprised that they must go through a time of trial or suffering. Perhaps, they have been faithful to learn and obey the Word and the trials still come. Sometimes, trials come simply to test and purify your faith.

You should be exceedingly glad on this account, though now for a little while you may be distressed by trials and suffer temptations, so that the genuineness of your faith may be tested. Your faith is infinitely more precious than the perishable gold which is tested and purified by fire. This proving of your faith is intended to redound or contribute to your praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ (the Messiah, the Anointed One) is revealed (1 Peter 1: 6-7).

4) A Need for Brokenness

The word *brokenness* may strike fear in some people, but it's really not a bad word. God doesn't desire to break our spirits, but He wants to break that outer shell, the flesh that prevents Him from being all He wants to be in and through us. He wants to break off things like pride, rebellion, selfishness and independence. God wants us to be totally dependent on Him, and suffering seems to bring us to that point. However, having to depend on God shouldn't cause us to feel sorry for ourselves. I once said, "Oh God, I'm so lonely, and I don't have anybody but you". And the Holy Spirit said, "Poor Mike, you're just stuck with God". I have discovered that having only God is a good position to be in (Bazza: 2013).

5) Build Compassion

Compassion is born out of experiencing similar problems. The Bible says: "We do not have a High Priest Who is unable to understand and sympathize and have a shared feeling with our weaknesses and infirmities and liability to the assaults of temptation, but One Who has been tempted in every respect as we are, yet without sinning" (Hebrew 4:15). It comforts to know that Jesus understands us and has compassion. Going through trials and experiencing God's deliverance better equips us to minister to others. Our pain is never wasted; it brings about compassion that reaches out to other hurting people by saying, "I've been there and God brought me through it, and He will do the same for you" (Bazza: 2013).

6) To Encourage Others

Apostle Paul said there were many things that God allowed him to go through simply as object lessons for other people. Hear him:

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I want you to know and continue to rest assured, brethren, that what has happened to me (this imprisonment) has actually only served to advance and give a renewed impetus to the spreading of the good news (the Gospel),...most of the brethren have derived fresh confidence in the Lord because of my chains and are much more bold to speak and publish fearlessly the Word of God... (Philippians 1: 12-14).

Even in Paul's imprisonment, his stability and ability to be used by God was evident. If we are to minister to others, we too must face some adverse circumstances. But if we stand in faith and confidence, God will bring us through to victory, and we will be a great encouragement to others in the process.

7) Because of the Word

Sometimes we suffer attacks from the enemy simply because of our involvement with the Word of God. For example, Mark 4:7 speaks in the parable of the sower, of those who hear the Word and endure it for a while... then when trouble or persecution arises on account of the Word, they immediately are offended (become displeased, indignant, resentful) and they stumble and fall away. When someone receives the Word of God, Satan delights in coming immediately to try to steal what's been sown in their heart. He knows the Word will strengthen us and help us live a victorious Christian life, and he wants to stop it if he can. So it's imperative to guard the Word in your heart and resist the devil from stealing it away from you.

8) Because of Living in the World

People may also face trials and suffer simply because we live in a world full of sin. But Jesus said: "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have perfect peace and confidence. In the world, you will have tribulations, and trials and distress and frustration; but be of good cheer (take courage; be confident, certain, undaunted); for I have overcome the world. I have deprived it of the power to harm you and have conquered it for you" (Jn. 16:33). What a promise! Understanding the reason for our suffering and having the assurance of the final glory we'll share should make it a little easier to enjoy our lives...even during the times of sharing in suffering.

The Word of God in Romans 8:17 encapsulate His invitation for us to exercise a higher level of faith that will carry us through life's challenges. It says: "And if

we are His children, then we are His heirs also; heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ sharing His inheritance with Him; only we must share His suffering if we are to share His glory”.

The Problem of Human Suffering

The problem of human suffering is better viewed from the perspective of St. Thomas Aquinas the great Dominican Theologian who sought to find an explanation for suffering. According to him, there are two kinds of evil in the world: physical evil and moral evil. Both have come into the world and into our human race as a result of original sin. Both physical evil and moral evil are absence of the good that should be there (Bazza: 2013). Take for example, when a two year old infant is suffering and dying of HIV/AIDS, in such a scenario, there is an absence of the good health that the infant should be enjoying. When there is a flood that results in the deaths and displacement of many people and the destruction of millions of Naira in property damage, there is an absence of good weather that should be enjoyed. When someone makes the decision to rob, kidnap or kill travellers on the Abuja-Kaduna highway, there is an absence of the good morality that should make up the character of the criminal.

Why do the evil so often seem to prosper? St. Thomas Aquinas says that the evil prosper for two reasons: First, that the evil person might look around and be ashamed of his/her conduct in the face of so good and loving a God, that they might be converted from their sinful ways; and secondly, so that God might be all the more justified when the evil person dies and faces God for judgment. The great King David made a very peculiar statement once. He had just done that awful episode in his life with Bathsheba, and he wrote Psalm 51. And in that Psalm he makes this peculiar statement to God, “... against you, you alone have I sinned, what is evil in your sight I have done”. He just murdered a man, committed adultery, and yet he says to God: “against you alone have I sinned”. King David represents the fickleness of human mind.

Finding God in our pain (Job; Isaiah 53; Luke 13:1-5)

Pain and sorrow are part of human existence. Each of us has known hurt and sadness, and often our instinct is to search for a reason why. Are we being punished for some wrongdoing? Is God trying to teach us something? Is God testing our faith? The truth however, is to state unequivocally that we learn and grow through suffering, but there is also a bigger picture. See Job 42:1-6; Mark 1:9-13; 2 Cor. 1:3-7; Phil. 3:7-11. The lesson we draw from all the foregoing texts is

that when we face hardship, many of us take comfort in the thought that we will grow and become better people for it. But is that always the ultimate reason for our suffering? Mark Galli posits that there is a bigger picture, and sometimes we can't see the larger reasons behind our life's circumstances (Bazza: 2013).

What is the purpose of suffering? Does it happen randomly? Does God send it or simply work through it? How does suffering demonstrate God's character? These are the questions we will find answers to in the following scriptural texts: Job 38:1-41; Daniel 2:20-22; Proverbs 31:8-9; Psalm 33:5; Mark 15:33-34; Romans 8:17-25; 1John 3:16-20. From the aforementioned, we can safely conclude that, sometimes, evil happens as a result of people exercising or abusing the free will that God lovingly bestowed on them.

Redeeming Suffering

We don't always know why bad things happen, but we do know the One who brings good from them. Genesis 37:12-26; Psalm 44:1-26; Isaiah 55:1-9; John 9:1-7; Acts 3:11-21; Romans 8:18-39. Followers of God have long wondered why the omnipotent and completely good God allows evil and suffering if He can stop it. The new Atheists have thrown this argument at believers in recent years, with varying degree of success. And of course, the issue of Theodicy the branch of theology that defends the ways of God is of perennial interests to students, clergy and the laity. But the existence of suffering in God's world is much more than an academic question or an intellectual conundrum. Just ask someone who has faced unjust suffering and you are likely to hear: Where did my prayers go, my cries for mercy and deliverance? Did I have the laziest of guardian angel in all of heaven?

Igwebuiké cum Biblical Response to unjust Suffering

If the concept of *Igwebuiké* as developed by the Nigerian Augustinian Professor of African Philosophy, Anthony Kanu Ikechukwu, a distinguished academic: The concept of *Igwebuiké* describes the unity of the African philosophical experience, which profoundly relates to a perspective driven ideology that epitomizes the manner of being in African ontology. With this description then, it can safely be concluded that the biblical response to unjust suffering is aptly captured by St. Peter the apostle in his epistle when he says: "Therefore, let those who suffer according to the will of God commit their souls to Him in doing good, as a faithful creator" (1 Peter 4:19). Let us bear in mind that Jesus explained to His

disciples why they should respond to mistreatment with love, kindness and good work just as it is being done in the spirit of *Igwebuike*.

But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what rewards have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? Therefore, you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect (Matthew 5:44-48).

Believers are called to be the “light of the world” (Matthew 5:14). They are always to reflect the character of their heavenly Father, who provides the necessities of life even to the unjust. They are to live as examples even under difficult circumstances. “And you became followers of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you become examples to all in Macedonia and Achaia who believe” (Thessalonians 1:6-7).

Suffering for God’s Kingdom

According to St. Paul, “the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared to the glory which shall be revealed in us” (Romans 8:18). In addition to the afflictions described earlier, he endured a “thorn in the flesh” possibly a chronic health problem that he had pleaded with God to remove on three occasions. Having a clear perspective of the future, and an understanding of God’s purpose for us, is crucial in facing life’s difficulties. Only when we earnestly look forward to the glories of the Kingdom of God can we view our own sufferings in a proper perspective. Certainly, our trials and difficulties are real and cannot be wished away. Yet their long-term importance pales into insignificance when compared with the sure realization of our great calling (Philippians 3:11-14).

Conclusion

Right from the beginning of time, questions bordering on the origin, cause, purpose, etc., of human suffering and its interpretation have agitated the minds of people from one generation to the next. While these questions continue to arise in the minds of scholars even in the contemporary era, this work

concentrated on providing a biblical, philosophical and pragmatic interpretation to human suffering, and how to help those who are victims to accept the fact that human suffering, when properly interpreted and placed within the realm of theology, has some eschatological dimensions that provide the sense of fulfillment and everlasting contentment. To articulate this point, this work, adopted an *Igwebuike* philosophical method of pragmatic and wholistic approach, a method which presents the problem of human suffering as dimensions of the whole. Using the aforementioned approach, this piece argued for a wholistic approach to the problem of human suffering. This in turn will help us have a clearer perspective of the future, and an understanding of God's purpose for us, is crucial in facing life's challenges.

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