
The Christian Response to Suffering

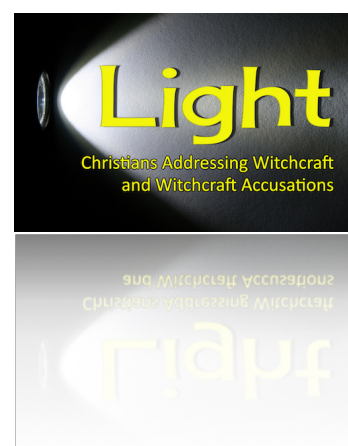
— an African perspective

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Christians Addressing Witchcraft
and Witchcraft Accusations

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Preface

The issue of suffering, its origin and how to deal with it has been an ancient problem to which people continue to try to find a solution. People become very vulnerable and open up to various suggestions during periods of suffering. Unfortunately in our part of the world, Africa, all kinds of calamities and sufferings are attributed to the works of evil forces, such as witches, sorcerers, demons, and the devil. This has led to the situation where many Christians have become so focused on the devil that sometimes all their attention is on the devil and his allied powers such as demons, witches, and sorcerers. Churches that do not include activities that are believed to deal with these evil powers in their liturgies and programmes tend not to be attractive. This situation has engendered fear in many Christians, undermining the power of Christ as the Bible reveals. Worse still, some charlatans have taken advantage of the situation to exploit church members and society in general.

This presentation is aimed at considering the appropriate response of Christians in ensuring that, in a world of different voices, we would continue to hear from God. In this pursuit, we shall discuss the causes of suffering, the nature of satanic attack and the sovereignty of God. We shall also provide pastoral guidance on what to do in case someone approaches a leader in relation to witchcraft possession, which has been the cause of the downfall of another person and other related issues.

1. Suffering in the World

Going through the Scripture generally, at least three possible sources of suffering can be deduced; there are those from natural sources, the devil, and God. These will be taken in turns.

1a. Suffering due to the Fall and Nature

After the Fall of humanity in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:14–19), the world has never been perfect. The universe and its systems, human beings and other living things have been subjected to frustration. The Epistle to the Romans brings this out clearly:

Yet what we suffer now is nothing compared to the glory he will reveal to us later. For all creation is waiting eagerly for that future day when God will reveal who his children really are. Against its will, all creation was subjected to God's curse. But with eager hope, the creation looks forward to the day when it will join God's children in glorious freedom from death and decay. For we know that all creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. And we believers also groan, even though we have the Holy Spirit within us as a foretaste of future glory, for we long for our bodies to be released from sin and suffering. We, too, wait with eager hope for the day when God will give us our full rights as his adopted children, including the new bodies he has promised us. We were given this hope when we were saved. If we already have something, we don't need to hope for it. But if we look forward to something we don't yet have, we must wait patiently and confidently.

Romans 8:18–25, NLT

Although Jesus has redeemed us from the Fall through his death and resurrection, believers live between the times of the “already-but-not-yet”. That is, though we are redeemed, our redemption has not yet been consummated. So we are still subject to the ‘fallen nature’, which means suffering and death still exist as an inevitable part of the world. For instance, old age comes with its associated diseases (loss of vision, loss of memory due to the dying of the brain cells, weaknesses, menopause, and so on). Biblical examples include Isaac's blindness (Genesis 27:1); Elisha's sickness and his subsequent death, yet Elisha's bones could raise the dead (2 Kings 13:14, 20–21); the death of the widow's son (1 Kings 17:17–18); the illnesses of Paul's co-workers (Epaphroditus, Timothy and Trophimus, Philippians 2:27; 1 Timothy 5:23; 2 Timothy 4:20). Natural occurrences such as floods and earthquakes at times affect us and even kill our loved ones. The reasons for such misfortunes could be as a result of the consequences of the Fall. Related to the natural cause is the fact that the world is governed by natural laws — laws of cause and effect, laws of sowing and reaping among others.

When these laws are violated, the natural consequences occur. For example, when one is exposed to contagious diseases or dangerous chemicals, suffering could be experienced because, whether knowingly or unknowingly, some natural law has been violated. This reason is not as a result of any evil thing that the person has done, but because a natural law has been broken and all of humanity live in a fallen world. The most painful one is when one suffers because someone else violates a natural law. An instance of this is a car accident caused by someone else's carelessness. An innocent person whether Christian or not can suffer or be affected here. Thus suffering may stem from the fact that a natural law has been broken or still as a result of the fallen nature of the world.

1b. Suffering Due to Works of Satan

In the Bible, Satan is presented as the cause of some aspects of suffering as in the case of Job (Job 1 & 2) and the case of the persecuted Christians (1 Peter 5:8–9). Clearly the Bible indicates that the devil instigates persecution against Christians which results in suffering and some cases death of believers (for example: Revelation 13:7; 1 Peter 5:8–9). What needs to be understood here is the fact that the kind of death or attack spoken of here is not ‘spiritual’. It is physical; the devil instigates or influences people to physically attack others. Furthermore, the Bible hints that

the devil induces 'spiritual' attack which may manifest in physical infirmity as in the case of Paul's "thorn in the flesh" (2 Corinthians 12:7). It is important to note how Paul explains the whole thing:

To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.

2 Corinthians 12:7-9, NIV

Examining the text shows that Paul was not stating that Satan was the 'real' cause of the "thorn in the flesh", but rather as the one who was used by the Lord to carry out that duty. This is the reason why Paul did not ask Satan to go away from him, but rather asked the Lord to take it away. The implication here is that Satan did not have any control over him but the Lord.

Again, Satan is shown as someone who is able to harness the power of the fallen world to bring suffering to the believer (Job 1:12-19, 2:7). In the book of Job, he was shown as being able to bring fire from heaven to burn and destroy things (Job 1:16). He was able to call "a powerful wind swept in from the wilderness and hit the house on all sides" (Job 1:19, NLT) to collapse it and kill the children of Job. He was able to incite Sabeans to steal and kill Job's animals as well his workers (Job 1:13-15). He was able to strike Job with boils (Job 2:3). What needs to be taken notice of in all these passages is that Satan could not do these things to Job who had faith in God. He had to ask permission from God before he was allowed to carry on his intention. The Lord was in the case of Job using him as a true believer of God who would stand for Him in good and bad times. The fact that Satan, no matter how powerful he is, could not carry out his plan without asking permission from God means the believer is very secure in the Lord. Satan himself knows about this. He told the Lord:

Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has? You have blessed the work of his hands, so that his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land. But stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face." The Lord said to Satan, "Very well, then, everything he has is in your hands, but on the man himself do not lay a finger."

Job 1:10-12, NIV

Here Satan was confessing to the Lord that He protects His own, those who have acknowledged Him as their Lord and would not allow him (the devil and his allies) to destroy them. Understanding this fact makes the believers more grounded in their faith and fearless of all sorts of evil powers including witches and demons.

Satan's main objective for every kind of suffering is that the people of God might curse God and deny Him. It is, however, important to know that in these cases, Satan could not touch Job, except with God's permission (Job 1:12; 2:6). Even in all cases where Satan is granted permission, God further places limits on him (Job 1:12, 2:4-6). Thus, Satan cannot just request God to bring suffering to a believer anytime. It is the Lord who is in control. The Lord promises the believers He will not let us be tempted beyond our ability and even with each temptation, He makes a way of escape (1 Corinthians 10:13).

1c. Suffering Coming from God

In both the Old and New Testaments, God is sometimes presented as the source of various kinds of suffering. When God is presented as the source of the suffering, it could either be as a result of no wrong done as in the case of Job (Job 1–2) and Paul’s thorn in the flesh (2 Corinthians 12:7–12) or as a result of sin as in the case of David’s suffering for killing Uriah and taking his wife (2 Samuel 12:13–18). Like a loving parent, God chastises His children not because He delights in doing so but because it is necessary. He does it to correct His children (Hebrews 12:9) in order that we may:

- be partakers of His Holiness (Hebrews 12:10),
- yield the peaceable fruit of righteousness (Hebrews 12:11), and
- not be condemned with the world (1 Corinthians 11:32).

God uses the sufferings we go through to perfect, establish, strengthen and settle us (1 Peter 5:10).

1d. The Christian’s Attitude

How then should we respond to suffering as Christians? Throughout scripture, servants of the Lord have gone through one form of suffering or another. No matter the source of the suffering, it is for a purpose and therefore we must seek to understand it and learn from the experience. For example, Paul said that the reason God allowed the thorn in his flesh was to keep him from becoming proud (2 Corinthians 12:7). Thus, here the Lord was helping Paul not to fall into the sin of pride. The ultimate cause of suffering was for him to live the Christian life as he had been preaching; it was for his good (Romans 8:28).

David said in Psalm 119:67, “Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word”. Here David accepts that he went astray, but when the Lord allowed suffering to come his way, he came back to his senses. Thus the suffering he encountered was for his own good. Generally then suffering has a way of keeping us closer to God and consequently, in obedience.

I want us to return to some remarks made by Satan in the book of Job concerning the security and blessings that Christians enjoy.

He asked, “Does Job fear God for nothing? You have always put a wall of protection around him and his home and his property. You have made him prosper in everything he does. Look how rich he is! But reach out and take away everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face!” — “All right, you may test him,” the Lord said to Satan. “Do whatever you want with everything he possesses, but don’t harm him physically.” So Satan left the Lord’s presence.

Job 1:9–12, NIV

Satan replied to the Lord, “Skin for skin! A man will give up everything he has to save his life. But reach out and take away his health, and he will surely curse you to your face!” — “All right, do with him as you please,” the Lord said to Satan. “But spare his life.”

Job 2:4–6, NIV

The implication is that the believer is so secured in the hands of the Master such that no one can harm him. Unless God permits it, Satan cannot touch the Christian. Thus, the focus of believers on Satan is misguided and not necessary. In the case of Job, God permitted the suffering to prove to Satan that His servants believe Him not because of what they get, but worship Him because they love Him.

In every case of suffering, we must believe that God cares deeply for us no matter the circumstances (Romans 8:37–39). We must expect God to give us the grace we need to bear the affliction until deliverance comes (1 Corinthians 10:13) or even if deliverance doesn't come (Daniel 3:16–18). We must always remember that our High Priest is interceding for us (Hebrews 4:14–16) and will do what is best in our circumstance.

James encourages believers (James 1:2–4) to ‘count it all joy when you go through diverse trials’. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:17 that these very sufferings are achieving for us ‘an eternal glory that far outweighs them all’ and that in comparison to this glory, these troubles are light and momentary” (NIV). In 1 Peter 4:12–19, the Apostle Peter lists out five ways Christians can respond to suffering:

- do not consider it strange or be surprised when you suffer (12),
- properly evaluate your suffering (15–18)
- rejoice in your suffering, for this makes you partners with Christ (13),
- entrust yourself to God for grace to endure or overcome (19),
- continue to do good (19).

The mark of maturity in a Christian is not freedom from pain but total trust in God even in pain.

In other words, Christians should not conclude that all troubles come from Satan and engage in active battle with him. The discussion so far shows that the Lord is in total control of the Christian's life. Even the suffering that Christians go through are allowed by the Lord. Christians therefore should not engage in battle with Satan but rather address their concern to the Lord who is in control of their affairs and has the power to address them. The people of God discussed so far who were permitted to be attacked by the devil such as Job and Paul never addressed the devil directly. Job presented all his concerns to God. He said that it was the Lord who was afflicting him and therefore he would put his case before Him (Job 13:3–4; see also Job 6:4; 10:1–3; 12:10; 13:3–4). The case was not between Job and Satan but between Job and his God. This great understanding made Job to succeed in his temptation.

In Paul's thorn in the flesh too, he prayed to God and not to Satan to take off the affliction (2 Corinthians 12:8). The implication here is that it was the Lord who had the power to reverse the situation. The confidence that this gives to Christians is that no matter the condition that we get into, our God is in control. He is able to do it. We must not focus on the devil, either to bind or to loose. We must have faith in our God who has promised that even in that condition He is in control.

From another perspective, Christians are so secured and protected that the devil, demons, witches, sorcerers and all powers of evil do not have any control over us. Once there is any kind of misfortune or suffering, we must know that the Lord knows about it. We must therefore

approach Him to redress the situation. Through prayer we may know the cause and know how to approach it. Thus Christians must carry all our troubles to the Lord.

Still from another perspective, Christians must believe that the Lord is with us as we go through our normal life (Matthew 28:20; Acts 18:10; Isaiah 41:10). With this in the background we must address all issues that come our way with the systems available to us, while at the same time praying to our Lord to know His will on daily basis (Matthew 6:10). For example, if a Christian is sick, he or she must seek medical attention, since it is God who has given human beings that medical knowledge, and the sickness has come about because of breaking a natural law. If the Christian dies in an accident, it must be considered as normal, since a natural law must have been broken. Christians do these because they know that the devil cannot overpower them unless the Lord has permitted him, and once Christians continue to pray the Lord will show what to do in case the issue is 'spiritual'. This issue of 'demonic attack' will be discussed later.

2. Nature of Satanic Attack

We have established that Satan is one source of suffering, yet he has to seek permission from God. As a follow up, we want to consider: "What is the nature of satanic attack?" In the Bible, the voice of Satan is heard and recorded directly three times. The first time was in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:1–5), the second in the book of Job (Job 1:9–11, 2:1–5) and the third with Jesus after his forty days fast (Matthew 4:1–11; Luke 4:1–13).

2a. Cause Believers to Doubt God and His Word

In Eden, Satan attacked the truth of God's word and caused Eve to doubt God. While speaking with God in the book of Job, Satan attacked God's blessing of Job and even tried to cause God to doubt if He had a following on earth. When he spoke directly with Christ, he attacked the power of God and tried to cause the Son to doubt His identity and the Father. Satan's arsenal against the Christian is to cause him to doubt God and His word.

2b. Influence Believers to Live against their Expressed Intention and God's Will

In other places where the work of Satan and his cohorts are evident, they try to oppose God by influencing believers to live in ways which are contrary to their expressed intentions and the word of God. Satan's objective in the suffering of Job was for Job to curse God to the face (Job 1:11, 2:5). Satan incited David to take a census of Israel against the counsel of his leaders (1 Chronicles 21:1–4), perhaps to examine whether God's promise of making Israel increase has been fulfilled so as to boast about it.

In Luke, Peter is influenced to live in a way contrary to his expressed intention (Luke 22:31–34, see also 22:55–62). In the Pauline corpus, Satan is portrayed as living up to his name 'adversary'; he tempts, misleads, torments, traps, hinders and deceives Christians (1 Thessalonians 3:5; 1 Corinthians 7:5; 1 Timothy 5:15; 2 Corinthians 12:7; 1 Thessalonians 2:18; 2 Corinthians 11:14). Thus, the nature of Satan's attack is basically to get Christians to doubt God's Word, God's love

and even their own identity in Christ and live contrary to the word of God. He twists God's word to confuse believers.

2c. Attacks Take Place in the Mind

Normally, Satan's assault on believers is in the mind (Ephesians 6:12, 2 Corinthians 10:3–5). In other words, the mind is the battle ground of Satan. In 2 Corinthians 10:5, Paul describes the strongholds of Satan as arguments which involves ideas, beliefs, doctrines, teachings and practices that make people disobey God. Satan tries to entrench these in the heart of people such that they are held captive to it. The main attack of Satan therefore is not physical. Neither is it 'spiritual' such as demonic, witchcraft or sorcery. It is psychological and philosophical in the sense that he attacks the minds and places thought and doubts in people.

2d. Influence People to Attack Physically

The devil, however, influences people to attack Christians physically. Clearly, the Bible indicates that the devil instigated persecution against Christians which resulted in suffering and, in some cases death of believers (for example: Revelation 2:9, 13; Revelation 3:9; Revelation 13:7; 1 Peter 5:8–9).

Now, if we take this type of attack and those of Job and Paul into consideration, we realise that besides the natural sources of suffering, all the attacks started in the spirit realm. The people involved were not aware of the things which were taking place in the spirit. Yet, it is those things that began in the spirit realm that manifested in the physical realm. The people themselves were not aware and as such did not have control of the things which were going on. Misunderstanding this aspect may deceive a person to think that the devil attacks God's people spiritually, but the underlining principle is that the issue or the battle is between the Lord and the devil. The Christian only looks to the Master (Christ) for victory. The Master is already victorious and has control over the issue. Losing focus of this will cause the Christian to look unto the threats that the devil brings instead of looking unto God.

Simply put, Satan's attacks is mainly in the mind. He can therefore influence people to attack physically. He can also begin something in the spirit realm that may manifest physically so as to cause sickness or a thorn in the flesh but these only happen on the permission of God. That is, it is God who dictates and not Satan. From this angle Satan does not have any control over God's people.

2e. The Christian's Attitude

Satan's primary method has not changed. Whenever you hear God's Word attacked, contradicted, being twisted, being mocked or dismissed, he may be speaking. He may speak through neighbours and friends, parents and siblings, teachers and classmates, sitcoms and movies, celebrities and musical lyrics, pastors and priests. In all his works, the aim is to get the believer to deny and forsake the Lord. In Job 1: 9, Satan asked the Lord, "Does Job serve you for nothing?" According to Satan, Job was serving the Lord because of the blessings of the Lord. Indeed, this stance of Satan reflects the African view which seeks to promote the worship of a deity who gives you something: protection, bumper harvest, fertility, and prosperity among others. When this deity fails to deliver, you discard it or better still you get a more powerful one.

Unfortunately, this voice is speaking even among believers today. Some people are tempted to worship God for what they can get; once God does not provide the expected blessings, they feel disappointed and sometimes seek alternative help. It is this same tendency that pushes believers to move from one 'man of God' to another or one prayer centre to another. Beware! Satan may be speaking.

Christians must know that Satan is still speaking through false teachings, syncretism, and wrong practices to attack them. Believers must flee from such tendencies and serve God contently wherever they find themselves.

Also, the New Testament shows that the ground upon which the devil attacks is sin. It is precisely by addressing the problem of sin that Christ's atoning work also brings about the defeat of Satan and the powers (Colossians 2:13–15). Consequently, in Colossians 2:15, the disarmament and public spectacle of the 'powers and authorities' follow the cancellation of the written code against sinners.

Other NT passages also suggest that forgiveness of sins, as an aspect of salvation, is linked with deliverance from the powers of the evil one (for example: Acts 26:15–18; Hebrews 2: 14–18; 1 John 3:8; Revelation 12:7–12; Galatians 1:4; Colossians 4:13–14). The NT therefore urges Christians not to allow sin to have dominion over them by giving in to the craving of the flesh (for example: Romans 6:12; Colossians 3: 5; Hebrews 12:14–17; 1 Peter 1:15–21; James 4:1–10; see also 1 John 3:2–6).

Paul especially recognizes that although, the compelling influence of the flesh has been broken by the work of Christ, the inner compulsion continually seeks to reassert its claim on Christians. He provides several lists of categories of sins, but in all of these he does not contrast "the flesh" with "the demonic," but rather with the "new person" or "the Spirit" (for example: 1 Corinthians 6:9–10; 1 Corinthians 5:11; 2 Corinthians 12:20; Colossians 3: 5–9; Ephesians 4:17–24; Galatians 5:19–23). This is very important since it shows that the issue is not spiritual, as some Christians believe. It always gives Christians the assurance that the demonic has no control over us. The greatest enemy of the Christian, therefore, is the flesh, the old nature.

Christians are warned against "the works of the flesh," not because they are demonic, but because they are concrete expressions of 'works' carried out by people who live in keeping with the human nature and that of the world around them. Such vices, according to Paul, may become the foothold of Satan and also bring the wrath of God (Ephesians 4:20; Colossians 3:6; Romans 1:18). Indeed, this is not to deny the possibility of physical attacks by the devil, through the influence of ungodly people. Rather it is to emphasize that primarily the demonic attack to Christians is 'mental' or, put another way, is to influence them to live in ways which are contrary to their expressed intentions and the Word of God. Thus, Christians should continually appropriate the victory of Christ wrought on our behalf on the cross. That is, Christians are not to fight with the devil but rather note that our armoury for protection against the enemy is based on what God has done in history in the coming of Christ. Christians are to stand by putting the Word of God into practice and be reminded of our position in Christ and the assurance that so far as we are under the sovereign control of God, no evil power will be able to overpower us.

3. The Sovereignty of God

3a. God's Sovereignty Overrules All

One of the greatest deceptions in the world is that which seeks to assert that Satan is all-powerful. Indeed, once we attribute almost all issues to Satan, we have made him all-powerful already. Sometimes Christians act as if the devil has the final say. But the Bible is clear that the Lord is God, the one true God, with overall supremacy over all spiritual powers (Deuteronomy 6:4; Deuteronomy 33:2–3; 1 Kings 18:39; Nehemiah 9:6; Job 38:7; Psalm 89: 5–8; Psalm 148:2; Ephesians 4:4–6). An understanding of the sovereignty of God will correct this error of thinking that Satan is powerful than the Lord. The sovereignty of God is the biblical teaching that all things are under God's rule and control, and that nothing happens without His direction or permission. In the Bible, God has overall supremacy over all spiritual powers and Satan is simply one of the spirits under God's authority (Job 1:6–7). These spirits, whether good or evil, remain under God's sovereignty.

The fact of God's sovereignty implies that Satan cannot take his own course in this life without the knowledge and the permission of God. This is God's world and everything and everybody is accountable to Him. Satan can tempt or afflict God's children by divine permission (Job 1:12; Matthew 4:1; Luke 22:31; 2 Corinthians 12:7). The agents he uses can be used of God to effect his divine plan (Matthew 16:21–23, Luke 24:25–26, see also Acts 2:23–24). For example, spirits designated as evil spirits (Judges 9:23; 1 Samuel 16:14–16) and lying spirits (1 Kings 22:19–23; 2 Chronicles 18:18–22) became envoys of God.

God's sovereignty is demonstrated explicitly in the Book of Job. God is seen as accepting Satan into His presence (Job 1:6), initiating the suffering of Job by asking Satan, "...Have you considered my servant Job?" (Job 1:8, NIV). He permits Satan to touch Job's possessions and body but limits him from taking his life (Job 2:6). He permits the suffering of a righteous and blameless man. God's word to Job in chapters 38 to 41 defends His authority to govern His creation without being accountable to human beings for His actions. In His sovereignty, "The Lord blessed the latter part of Job's life more than the first" (Job 42:12–17, NIV). He has the final say.

3b. The Christian's Attitude

For us Christians, the sovereignty of God should make us rest, knowing that God is in total control of our lives. Even when it hurts, He works it out for my good (Romans 8:28). Unfortunately, some people resign in life because of the sovereignty of God. They argue that "what will be will be" and so no need to plan or work. However, the sovereignty of God does not take away personal responsibility; it does not make us puppets in the hands of God. God is able to work within the confines of human limitations, mistakes and correct choices. Job got it right when he declared "though he slays me, I will trust him..." (Job 13:15, NIV). Job made this statement when he was in a terrible time of pain and suffering. He had lost his possessions and his health. His friends were of no help. His wife offered no support and in fact told him to give up and curse God (Job 2:9). Yet Job realised that, ultimately, the suffering he endured was allowed by God. It is God who has the right and the power to 'slay' him. Even in the midst of his pain, Job knew that "the Lord gave and the Lord had taken away" (Job 1:21). Hannah rightly realised that "the LORD

brings death and makes alive; and he brings down to the grave and raises up" (1 Samuel 2:6, NIV). The Lord alone holds the key of death (Revelation 1:18). The quality of Job's faith is seen in his resolve that even if God's plans results in his death, Job will continue to trust Him. Job may not have understood what was the cause and purpose of his suffering, but he knew that God is good, loving, and trustworthy. Indeed, in times when Christians cannot see the hand of God, they can trust God's heart; the Lord will never abandon His chosen ones.

Another response of Job in his understanding of God's sovereignty was to worship. When Job heard the horrific news of the total loss of everything he once enjoyed, he did what many would consider an unusual thing, "then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head, and he fell to the ground and worshiped" (Job 1:20, NIV). He was so settled that God was still God and deserved to be worshipped. Job could only respond this way because he understood the sovereignty of God.

Still another of Job's response was to look beyond the present world to the end of time. Job 19:25–27 reads, "I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes — I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!" (NIV) Christians must look beyond what we see. We believe that there is life after death. The resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ shows that indeed once we believe in Him, there is hope of eternal life. Eternal life must be our focus, and not of worldly issues (1 Corinthians 15:12–15; 1 John 2:24–25).

In summary, as a Christian you can learn from Job. You must acknowledge that the Lord is in total control of your life. That you are responsible for your life through praying and planning. You must continually trust the Lord in all circumstances. You need to worship the Lord no matter what you go through and also look forward to the next life, when Jesus comes to complete what he came to do.

4. The Christian Response toward a Suspected Witchcraft or Demonic Case

In spite of the various responses provided here someone may approach a leader of being a witch, and of course being the cause of trouble in another person's suffering. Or someone or a group of people may suspect another, or even a leader may suspect another of witchcraft or demonic possession that might have been the cause of trouble of another person's suffering. In such a case what must be done? The following are also worthy of our consideration.

4a. Do not Rush in 'Delivering' Oppressed People

Arriving at a conclusion that a person's case is Satanic or demonic attack needs extra care. Some people who have studied the healing and exorcistic ministry of Jesus have analysed the following to be signs of demonic presence: extraordinary strength, indifference to the pain of the sufferer, vocalisation of distress when confronted by Jesus, and a change in the sufferer's voice. Nevertheless, currently psychiatrists show that these symptoms can almost all be explained in some naturalistic way. While this does not rule out the possibility of demonic presence in some cases, it shows that many cases which people consider demonic may be natural issues. Therefore,

arriving at a decision of demonic activity or witchcraft possession should not be made lightly. If the counsellor has not received discernment or a clear prophetic insight, which must have been accepted by the client, he or she must explore all possible natural explanations. For instance, while Jesus sometimes cast out demons, there are some cases which appeared demonic in which he does otherwise. In other words, those issues were not demonic but sin that needed to be dealt with and overcome. The following are some examples:

- He did not cast out the demon of lust from the woman caught red-handed in the act of adultery (John. 8:1–11);
- He did not cast out demons from the woman of whom it was said “had lived a sinful life” (Luke 7:36–50);
- He did not expel the demon of lying from Peter for betraying him three times (Luke 22:31, 22:54–60, see also John 19:15–19).

In the epistles, Paul too did not cast out:

- The demon of lust from the man who was having sexual relations with his father’s wife (1 Corinthians 5:1–5);
- The demon of division from the saints in Corinth (1 Corinthians 3:1–9);
- The demon of slavery from the Galatians who had been bewitched (Galatians 3:1–6).

The implication of these examples is that the issues were not demonic but sin. They did not need deliverance but self-control.

This is to say that people must not rush to perform exorcism on others. Deliverance or exorcism may be performed after a person has passed through counselling session and it has become absolutely clear that the problem is demonic. Counsellors should be able to deal with such cases, but in such complex situations, the clients should be referred to the leadership of the church.

4b. Not to Doubt the Power of God in Deliverance

This does not mean that exorcism or deliverance should be pushed to the periphery. On the one hand, if Jesus’ ministry and that of Paul’s are taken into consideration, then, exorcism should not be narrowed to a special group of people who are thought to be gifted in the field, but should be opened to any member of the prophetic community (since these signs are to follow those who believe — Mark 16:15–18). In the case of Jesus, he dealt with the situations as they arose in his ministry. Similarly Paul dealt with the familiar spirit during the course of his ministry. The implication of these is that there is no need to set aside a special time or place for the performance of exorcism. The prophetic community or the people of God should not be limited by formal ways of services. They should be ready at any time to allow the Holy Spirit to direct deliverance or healing, even during a Sunday service.

4c. Methods of Deliverance

As to the techniques or methods of exorcism, preferably those used by Jesus and the apostles are to be followed. Jesus’ main method of exorcism is a simple word of command. In one case, after

Jesus spitting, He touched the tongue of a deaf and dumb; he never did that again (Mark 7:32–33). On another occasion, he spat on the ground and made mud from his saliva, and placed on a blind man's eye and asked him to go and wash (John 9:5–7; compare similar one with only spit in Mark 8:23–25); he never did that again. On one occasion, He asked of the name of the demons (Mark 5:9–10); he never asked again. The apostles simply commanded the name of Jesus in healing (for example: Acts 3:6; 9:34). Since magico-religious practices have been prominent in African traditional practices, using them may be ways of communicating the biblical message to the people. However, such intent is undermined if the principles go against the ethical code of the people and Scripture.

Allowing the 'demons to speak' or the client to project himself or herself outwardly by speaking during exorcism may be accommodated privately and never publicly, since the utterance may cause further problems. It only gives the exorcist the chance to follow up in counselling; sometimes the leader will realise through the voice that the situation is not demonic as he thought. In such cases, deliverance worsens the situation. The leader must get back to counselling. Generally, the methods should be simple to show trust in the power of Jesus, whose death has given the believer the authority to exercise this kind of ministry.

4d. Avoid any Practice that is Questionable

Dangerous practices must be discouraged. For example, extracting confessions publicly from self-claimed witches in order to arrest attention before exorcism, naïve people may be responsive to suggestive stories and may assume themselves to be possessed. Again such confessions can put a social stigma on self-claimed witches who may never be accepted in society again. Confession, however, can be done privately. Jesus sometimes took people outside the crowd, and privately prayed for them (Mark 7:33; 8:23). Furthermore, chaining of witches, and enforcing long periods of fasting and prayer on clients are quite dangerous practices, since the need for these may be an indication that the exorcists have no authority over the situations, or the problems may be natural and needing immediate medical attention.

The remark in the Gospels, in some cases, about the need for prayer (and fasting) in exorcism (Mark 9:29; and Matthew 17:21 in some versions such as the Authorised Version) — and on which some exorcists base this practice — should be understood with regard to the exorcists (who pray and fast) but not the demoniacs (who do not fast). Too much ritual may show a lack of spiritual power on the part of the exorcist and, in a way, the authority, that is, Jesus, to whom he appeals for deliverance. The focus should always be on Christ and what he has done for the world.

4e. The Role of the Holy Spirit and the Work of Christ

The role of the Holy Spirit in effecting the work of Christ in the life of the believer must also be emphasised. Therefore, the significance of water baptism as being a sign of the believer's identification with Christ in his death, burial and resurrection need to be highlighted (for example: Acts 9:17–18; Acts 10:48; Romans 6:1–14). The guarantee of the believers' eternal security in Christ, with all its privileges such as their election, justification and glorification must be emphasised (for example: 1 Ephesians 1:3–21; Romans 5:8; Romans 8:28–31; John 3:1–2). The person of the Holy Spirit and His role in the believer's life must be stressed, especially the purpose of the baptism of the Holy Spirit, which is so crucial to Pentecostal ministry. In this case,

stress needs to be laid on the purpose of Holy Spirit baptism as, for example, to give one power for service, full assurance of salvation, edify an individual, that is, strengthen one's personality-spirit and power to live the Christian life (Acts 1:8; 2 Corinthians 1:22; 1 Corinthians 14:3; Acts 11:18; Romans 8:9–16). There is a general need for teaching basic Christian doctrines.

5. Concluding

This presentation considered the response of the people of God in the Bible from an African perspective. It was shown that in the Bible suffering is thought of as the result of the Fall and thus could be of a natural cause. It might also come from God as a form of discipline to His children, and it might also originate from Satan, as he sought permission from the Lord. It was further shown that Satan did not have power of his own to afflict the people of God, and so it is today.

The people of God did not accuse Satan of bringing suffering on them. Thus their attention was not concentrated on the demonic. Rather most of the evil some people encountered, such as sexual immoralities and disobedience were considered as lack of self-control. Christians have been discouraged from considering suffering as demonic and rather use naturalistic approach to issues, unless the Holy Spirit clearly revealed an issue to them. Christians have been exhorted to emphasize the role of the Holy Spirit in the Christian life so as not to live in the flesh. It is hoped that by these principles Christians would be able to prove through our talk and walk that Jesus is alive today and greater than all other powers.

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