

A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO SUFFERING – WITH REFERENCE TO THE IMBONGU PEOPLE

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Introduction

The Imbongu people, in the Ialibu area in the Southern Highlands Province of Papua New Guinea, were involved with spirits. Their everyday life was connected somehow with the spirits. There were laws and conditions set aside by the Imbongu people with the spirits they worshipped and respected. If the laws and conditions were broken, there was a problem affecting their society and environment. They believed that suffering, or disaster, came when they offended the spirits.

Today, these ideas about spirits are still in the minds and hearts of the Imbongu Christian people. But today, Christians substitute God for spirits, and they believe that suffering, disaster, and evil affect the lives of the people, because of their relationship problems with God. The beliefs and practices they had with the spirits are still practised within their Christian beliefs. This means that, when suffering and disaster enter their lives, they believe that it comes from God, because of their sins. Some examples include, when the waves destroyed villages and people around Aitape, many people around the country suggested that, because of their sinful songs and actions, God sent the waves to destroy them. Similar statements were made when the volcano erupted in Rabaul and destroyed the township. They said, “Rabaul people sing a lot of dirty songs concerning women, so that’s why God punished them.”

Are these beliefs and statements true? Does suffering and evil come from God? These are some questions that we have to explore in the Bible to clarify the beliefs of the Imbongu people. These questions influenced me to write about suffering. Imbongu Christians today still have this idea that suffering is caused by their sinful actions against God. When a Christian suffers from sickness, or other problems in their life, they go to see the pastor or elder in the congregation, confessing their sins to them. After all this, they cook some meat, showing that their sins are forgiven. Then they expect healing. Their beliefs don't allow for a continuing experience of suffering or sickness.

I will write about the beliefs of the Imbongu people towards suffering. I am going to find out what the Bible says about suffering, and, therefore, what we, as Lutherans, teach and believe about suffering – especially looking at Martin Luther's teaching about suffering. In this paper, I will try to help the Imbongu people understand the meaning of suffering, within the biblical concept.

1. Suffering in Traditional Times

A. Causes of Suffering

My father, Nimbo Taru, was very sick when he was four years old. He had a terrible sickness that nearly ended his life. His father, Tamu, had to look for some ways to heal his poor son's serious sickness.

He had one option – to bring his son's sickness before the spirits around his area. In his area were plenty of spirits, with different roles within the community. Therefore, Tamu had to go to all those spirits, asking for their help in curing his son's sickness. Tamu believed the spirits caused his son's sickness. He knew that there was something wrong between him and the spirits. There was something wrong with the relationship between him and the spirits. Tamu had to investigate his life and his relationship with the spirits.

After finding out the cause of the sickness, he went directly to the spirits, saying, "Sorry, I beg you to forgive my wrong doings, and to spare my son's life." After the repentance prayers and rituals, his son's

sickness was healed. Showing his satisfaction and happiness, Tamu killed a red-hair pig as a sacrifice to the spirit.

Imbongu people lived with spirits, worked with them, and feared them. Spirits either brought disaster or happiness to the community. When they were happy with the community, they brought blessing. When they were angry, they brought disaster to the people. Spirits were considered very powerful, and highly respected. The community had laws, taboos, and conditions to govern their relationships with these spiritual powers.

When sickness or disaster overcame the community, the chief of the village, somehow, knew that there was something wrong between the community and the spirits. He had to call a meeting and find out the cause of the sickness. The belief and vision of the people was to have a healthy community. They didn't want sickness and unhappiness in their village. If sickness or disaster was around their community, they usually looked among themselves, finding out who had offended the spirits, and then they looked for ways to heal that sickness, by making reconciliation with those offended.

Imbongu people believed that sickness was a sign, showing them they had broken the taboos or conditions governing their relationships with the spirits. Also, they believed the sickness came from one of their family member's sins. Imbongu people didn't have any idea about germs, or other natural causes, that affected their lives.

When someone was suffering badly from sickness, the Imbongu people even looked back to past generations for the cause of that suffering. The relatives of the suffering victim had to call a meeting to discuss the suffering. The paternal and the maternal sides of the suffering victim had to come together for these discussions.

Some issues or questions raised in the discussion included:

- Did the paternal ancestors of the family of the suffering victim do anything to the maternal ancestors of the family?

- Did the mother and father of the suffering victim do anything wrong to their tribesmen, or deceased relatives?
- Did the suffering victim's grandparents commit any sin that was affecting the victim?

The paternal and maternal sides of the suffering victim had to answer all these kinds of questions. When they found out their mistake, they had to say sorry to the spirits, and do some repentance rituals to show their repentance in the eyes of the people and the spirits. After all these healing and repentance rituals, the suffering victim was healed.

The other belief the people had about the suffering of a person was the problem about the relationship between the community and the spirits. They used the same procedure, by calling all the paternal and maternal sides of the family together, and started discussing the suffering. Some issues and questions raised were:

- How was the victim's relationship with the community?
- How was the victim's relationship with the spirits?
- Had any laws (taboos) been broken?
- Were there any conditions unfulfilled?

The victim, and his/her relatives, investigated all these areas to discover the cause of the suffering or sickness. Imbongu people had a strong relationship with the spirits, and conditions were set aside for them to follow. This was a part of their everyday life.

I also found out that, in Thai society, the beliefs about suffering and evil were similar to the beliefs of the Imbongu people. Thai people believed that suffering came to people's lives because a taboo was broken. Otherwise, Thai people also believed that neglecting an ancestor, and the spirits, brought suffering into the lives of the people. Other disasters, too, they believed, were caused when certain people manipulated the spirits – such as in sorcery and witchcraft. Accidents,

too, are believed to come from the spirits, because of wrongdoings, or breaking of taboos.¹

B. Rituals

After healing of the suffering, Imbongu people had to show their appreciation to the spirits, by special repentance rituals. They had to look for a pig that had a red hair. The red-haired pig was scarce and unusual in those times. They had to kill that pig, and roast it in the ground oven (*mumu* pit). After it was well roasted, the men had to bring that pig to the men's house.

Special chants were sung by the men, while bringing the roasted pig to the men's house. Special dressings were also put on by the group that was taking part in the repentance rituals. The pig was put in a special place in the men's house. That place was well decorated with bones of pigs and humans, too. That special area, or part of the house, was highly respected and feared. The men believed the spirits dwelled around there.

After some time, the roasted pig was gone. The men believed that the spirits had eaten that meat, and they were very happy that the spirits accepted their repentance rituals, and that they wouldn't disturb their life with suffering again. Youths under the age of 16, and women, were not allowed to see these things or ceremonies.

When the roasted pig in the men's house was gone, the men knew that the spirits had accepted their sacrifice. They were happy, because reconciliation was made through the pig. The roasted pig had done a great thing between the men and the spirits.

Now, showing their happiness and acceptance of the spirits, the men had to perform some rituals. It was important that they renewed their relationship through taboos and conditions. The men had to go back to the men's house and communicate with the spirits, saying, "We accept the wrongdoings that we have done to you spirits. We have broken the taboos, but now you spirits accept our rituals, so we are

¹ Marguerite G. Kraft, *Understanding Spiritual Power: a Forgotten Dimension of Cross-Cultural Mission and Ministry*, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1995, p. 16.

strengthening the laws and taboos. We will try our best to keep our covenant strong.”

We see that the Imbongu people believed that their suffering had spiritual causes. They looked for whom had offended the spiritual powers and beings, and caused this suffering to come. Sometimes, they found that the offence was caused by the victim of the suffering, the victim’s relatives, or even something the victim’s ancestors did in past generations. Reconciliation had to be made to the offended spirits, and then the spiritual powers, or beings, would remove that suffering from the people.

2. Biblical Perspectives on Suffering

God’s people have always wondered about why there is suffering in this world. They have asked about the reason and purpose of suffering. In this section, I will look at some of the biblical interpretations, or perspectives, about the reason and purpose of suffering.

A. Old Testament

Some people might think that God and suffering don’t go together. Instead, they think that suffering is related to evil, and to Satan. Some of the communities around Israel thought that sickness and suffering came from hostile supernatural forces.²

Harrison writes that the Babylonians believed that evil spirits entered them by some openings on the head. To prevent this they wore necklaces, nose rings, and charms, to protect them from those evil spirits. The Egyptians, too, believed that evil spirits caused sickness and suffering. They had to see the priest-physician to cure their suffering and sickness. The priest-physician had to use magical formulas and charms to determine the cause, and to cure it.³

² R. K. Harrison, “Disease”, in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 1, George Arthur Buttrick, ed., Nashville TN: Abingdon Press, 1962, p. 847.

³ Harrison, “Disease”, p. 847.

These communities practised witchcraft to cure their suffering and sicknesses. They had no idea, or belief, that sickness was caused from germs, or other things.

With the Israelites, their faith concerning suffering was different altogether from the surrounding communities. The Israelites didn't see suffering and sickness as coming from evil forces. They believed sickness and suffering came from God, Yahweh, because their relationship with God was not good. When the Israelites forgot their covenant relationship with God, and disobeyed the laws and commandments of God, this brought suffering to their lives. They didn't believe in other sources of suffering.⁴

In their covenant-relationship with God, the people of Israel were to follow the laws that God gave them. These laws were a unique thing for the Israelites – for they separated Israel from the people around them, and gave them guidelines for a good and healthy life, too. The Israelites had to eat certain foods, follow various rules about washing, and avoid unhealthy activities. Their lives were laid out by the laws and commandments of God. Following God's laws and commandments helped the Israelites to lead a healthy life, free of suffering.⁵

If someone was suffering from sickness, the Israelites knew that the suffering person must have broken the law. This suffering was a sign that they had neglected, or ignored, their covenant relationship with God. So, the priests had to perform sacrifices to reconcile the Israelites with God again. In Ex 15:26, the Lord warned His people that, if they disobeyed His laws and commands, He would bring sickness to their lives. For the people in the Old Testament, suffering was a spiritual matter, not just a physical matter.⁶

When the biblical writers reflected on the origin of suffering, in the story of the Fall, this idea about humans breaking their relationship

⁴ R. K. Harrison, "Healing", in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 2, George Arthur Buttrick, ed., Nashville TN: Abingdon Press, 1962, p. 546.

⁵ Harrison, "Healing", p. 546.

⁶ *Ibid.*

with God seems to be emphasised, too. Adam and Eve doubted God's word, and disobeyed Him. The close fellowship of God with mankind was broken. The story tells how, because of this, women will suffer as wives and mothers. For the men, there will be hardship; the soil will make them work hard to make a living. Finally, there will be suffering that leads to death.⁷

Sometimes, the question about the origin of the evil and suffering is asked, "How did it start and where did it come from?" Some people see in the snake a symbol of Satan, and put the blame on him. But this is not the major point of this story. The origin of evil and suffering is a mystery.⁸ The major point of the story is that Adam and Eve doubted God's word. They sinned, and rebelled against God.⁹

Does this mean that sin causes suffering? The story of the Fall shows us that suffering can be directly related to sin. What happened to Adam and Eve, when they doubted God and disobeyed Him, can happen when we disobey God, too. There are consequences of our sinful actions, and often these bring suffering to us and to others.¹⁰

However, suffering is not always directly related to personal individual sins. The Fall has meant that we live our lives in a fallen world. Therefore, the good creation of God's original plan has been disturbed. Not all human suffering is the result of personal sins. There are tragedies that happen, which don't distinguish between the good and the bad. This is the result of living in a fallen world. Jesus, too, showed that this type of suffering isn't the result of the personal sin of the one suffering, or of one of his/her ancestors (John 9:1-3; Luke 13:1-5)

⁷ J. T. E. Renner, *Genesis*, Adelaide SA: Lutheran Publishing, 1984, pp. 56-57; Robert Kolb, *The Christian Faith: a Lutheran Exposition*, St Louis MO: Concordia Publishing, 1993, pp. 89-90; O. A. Piper, "Suffering and Evil", in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 4, George Arthur Buttrick, ed., Nashville TN: Abingdon Press, 1962, p. 451.

⁸ Walther Zimmerli, *Old Testament in Outline*, Edinburgh UK: T. & T. Clark, 1978, pp. 169-170; Richard Haar, *Suffering and the Christian*, Adelaide SA: Luther Seminary, 1983, p. 7.

⁹ Kolb, *Christian Faith*, p. 90; Piper, "Suffering and Evil", p. 451.

¹⁰ Haar, *Suffering and the Christian*, p. 7.

Even though the story of the Fall tells about suffering, mankind is not without hope. God, Yahweh, is creator, and everything remains constantly, and finally, under His divine control. The power of evil and suffering is not more powerful than God. This shows that, however big an evil thing or suffering may happen to mankind, it will not take them away from the saving work of God. God's loving care and concern is with His people. In the story of the Fall, God went looking for Adam and Eve, although they had sinned against Him, and hid from Him. He gave them clothing of skins when they tried to cover themselves with leaves. Even though they will face suffering, God shows that He is always close, and cares for them.¹¹

The Psalms often show this belief of Israel. They show that, even though they face suffering, defeat, and helplessness, the Israelites trusted that God was with them. Psalm 23, for example, shows the trust of the writer that God is near in times of suffering.¹²

Job is an example of someone who suffered. What does his story of suffering teach us?

The friends of Job are like some people, who say that suffering is a judgment from God for those who do evil things. They accused Job, saying he was suffering, because God was angry with his unfaithfulness. But Job defended himself, saying that he hadn't done anything displeasing to God. He challenged his friends to show him what sin he had done that God is punishing. But they couldn't. They were just following the traditional belief that suffering is God's punishment for those who do things against God. It's like God's anger sent suffering, as a payback for the wrong a person has done. But Job couldn't agree with this. Instead, he blamed God for the suffering he was experiencing. He called God a cruel God, who laughs at His own creation that bears suffering and death.¹³ The story of Job rejects the idea that suffering is always a punishment from God for something a person does wrong.

¹¹ Renner, *Genesis*, pp. 58-59.

¹² J. T. E. Renner, *Psalms*, Adelaide SA: Lutheran Publishing, 1980, pp. 54-55.

¹³ Zimmerli, *Old Testament in Outline*, p. 163.

The suffering of Job is a mystery. The book doesn't really answer all the questions about why there is suffering. It shows us that Job, who was suffering, asks a lot of questions that are not really answered, and this is the struggle for many suffering people. Where is God? Why is He hiding His face from me? All these times, I was worshipping God, so why does He turn away from me? These are some of the doubts and questions Job had, which suffering people ask, too.¹⁴

Job tried to find the answers to his suffering, but he couldn't discover the answers. But, one thing Job discovered, was that he was a sinner, just like any other ordinary person. However, in his situation, his suffering was not related to any of his personal sins against God. Yet, in Job's suffering, he was redirected to God, to confess Him as sovereign, and to praise Him as God. And so, something positive comes from Job's suffering, even when he doesn't get the answers to all his questions about his suffering. Job wanted God to create a new life from the chaos in his life. Job never got easy answers, but God led him through this chaos in his life. In this, we can see that suffering brought a more-important and deeper understanding in Job's relationship with God.¹⁵

Sometimes Israel, as a nation, experienced suffering. God used this, too, so that the people, or nation, could look back to their relationship with God. God used some nations, like the Assyrian power, as a rod of His anger to discipline the Israelites for their disobedience to Him, so that the Israelites could repent, and be reconciled with God again. Also, their relationship with God could be renewed again.¹⁶

Despite all this, the nation of Israel was always turning its back on God. In Deutero-Isaiah, there comes the word from the prophet – that a servant would suffer on behalf of the people. This servant would suffer, by taking the punishment of the people on Himself (Is 53:2-

¹⁴ H. H. Rowley, *The Faith of Israel: Aspects of Old Testament Thought*, London UK: SCM Press, 1956, pp. 515-516.

¹⁵ Haar, *Suffering and the Christian*, pp. 8-9.

¹⁶ Rowley, *Faith of Israel*, p. 259.

12).¹⁷ The New Testament writer saw this as a prophecy of Jesus Christ, and His saving work.

B. New Testament

The cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ are central to all God's dealings with us. Therefore, our suffering, as Christians, can never be understood apart from this.¹⁸

In the cross of Christ, we clearly see the saving work of God, and the revealed love of God for mankind. But it is not just the love of God that is seen in the cross, but also His condemnation of evil, and His conquering of our enemies (that is, sin, suffering, and death). In the epistles, too, Paul talked a lot about the saving work of God, through the suffering of Jesus Christ. The cross was the central point in the epistles. Paul understood that, through the suffering of Jesus Christ, we are made righteous with God. It is not through the law, and by doing good deeds, that we are called righteous. No, we are called righteous, by faith alone.

This points out clearly that, for Christians, suffering is no longer judgment and punishment for sin, because Christ has taken the punishment for sin in our place. The central New Testament teaching, and Christian doctrine, is that, through Christ's death, we have forgiveness, and are not guilty before God. The suffering Christians face, is not punishment from God (Rom 8:1-2). It isn't necessarily His condemnation for particular sins.¹⁹

Christ's defeat of death is His defeat of suffering. When Christians face suffering they aren't without hope, because they know that, despite seeing and feeling pain and tragedy, they still trust Christ's victory over death.

But Christians still suffer and die – why? Christ's death didn't totally remove evil, death, and suffering immediately, but He broke

¹⁷ Piper, "Suffering and Evil", p. 452.

¹⁸ Tom Smail, "The Cross and the Spirit: Towards a Theology of Renewal", in *Charismatic Renewal*, London UK: SPCK, 1995, p. 60.

¹⁹ Haar, *Suffering and the Christian*, pp. 22-23.

their power, and promised that they can't destroy us (Rom 8:37-39). We are protected by the blood of Jesus Christ. For Christians, death does not separate us from God, but brings us closer to God (Phil 1:21-23). Through suffering, too, we can have a much closer relationship with God, by trusting in Him, and not in ourselves (2 Cor 1:8-10, Rom 8:17).²⁰

God didn't avoid suffering. He met suffering, and suffered Himself. We try to avoid suffering. But God's purpose is not always to take us out of situations of suffering. He does promise to be with us always, throughout our suffering. Christ will always be with us. Suffering and death can't change that. Christ, Himself, went through pain and suffering, and He feels, and understands, the pain and suffering we face in our lives, and that makes the presence, peace, love, and comfort of Christ come closer within our suffering.²¹

Christians recently asked some questions, like, "Where was God when the tsunami wave destroyed villages near Aitape? Where was God when the volcano erupted in Rabaul?" We can answer, "Just where He was when His own Son was killed at Calvary." God was, and is, there with us in our suffering. This is the great message of Christ's death for us. God takes our suffering on Himself. He entered our problems, and experienced our pain.²²

Our question is, "Why do we suffer?" But the greater question is: "Why does God suffer?" In the death of Christ for us, we see that God's love for us is beyond our understanding. Yes, God suffers for us. He does this by suffering with us. This leads us to put all our trust in Him. In our suffering, our questions of "why?" turn us to God to trust Him, and to look to Him alone as our only help.²³

Suffering can tempt us. Because of pain, we can be tempted to lose faith in God. If in times of suffering we trust in our own strength and power to overcome suffering, this can lead us away from faith in

²⁰ Piper, "Suffering and Evil", p. 453; Haar, *Suffering and the Christian*, p. 24.

²¹ Ibid., p. 25; Smail, "The Cross and the Spirit", p. 65.

²² Paul J. Lindell, *The Mystery of Pain*, Kehl/Rhein: Editions Trobisch, 1982, p. 39.

²³ Haar, *Suffering and the Christian*, p. 28.

God. But if we take suffering, tribulation, and temptation as an education for our spiritual life, and reduce our trust in our own strength and might, then it strengthens our relationship with the risen Lord (Rom 8:17).²⁴

Christians have to have a strong faith that the new life they have is not theirs, but it is through Jesus Christ. Therefore, Christians have to accept suffering patiently, instead of rebelling against the Lord. No matter how heavily believers have to suffer, they can be sure of Christ's final triumph over all the power of evil (John 16:33). As disciples of Christ, we have to respond with love, patience, forgiveness, and reconciliation through suffering.²⁵

The New Testament clearly teaches that being a disciple means following Jesus' call to take up our cross and follow Him. Believing in Jesus doesn't just mean obeying a set of laws, but being in relationship with Him. This means also sharing with Him as Paul said – dying with Him, and rising with Him (Rom 6:4). Christ suffered, and our suffering can be a sign that we belong to Christ. Suffering places us alongside of Christ. Stephen, the first martyr, met his death in the same forgiving love to his enemies as Christ did when He was crucified (Acts 7:60). As Christ's disciple, he followed Christ in suffering.²⁶

Paul, too, experienced suffering as a follower of Christ. He didn't just follow Christ, when God rescued him from suffering situations. He learnt to trust God at anytime, and in any situation. Paul tells us in 2 Cor 12:7-9 about a painful situation in his life. He prayed to God to take away his pain. But God didn't deliver Paul from his suffering. God taught him the way of the cross – not rescuing him from his suffering, but leading him into a stronger faith in the midst of his suffering (2 Cor 12:9-10). Paul was also imprisoned for preaching (Acts 16:23), and was shipwrecked on his missionary journey to Rome

²⁴ Piper, "Suffering and Evil", p. 453.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Smail, "The Cross and the Spirit", pp. 65, 68-69.

(Acts 27). He didn't escape persecution or misfortune. He suffered these, as a follower of Christ.²⁷

The book of Revelation, too, clearly teaches that followers of Christ face suffering. John wrote that Christians, persecuted for their faith, should not give up their faith in Christ. John was shown that, even if Christians must die for their faith, they will live with Christ. Death, persecution, and trials aren't the last things, or the end of life. Christ has broken the power of death. Revelation points out clearly that Christ didn't take away the persecutions and trials that Christians faced. But the good news is proclaimed clearly in Revelation. Christ has won the victory. And that victory can never be removed, even when suffering or persecution is faced by Christians.²⁸

Being a follower of Christ means becoming like Him in humiliation, that is, in suffering and weakness (1 Peter 2:21). Christians have to accept suffering, because we are the disciples of Christ (2 Tim 2:3). Peter tells his readers not to be surprised when they have to endure suffering in their lives. It is a testing of their faith (1 Peter 4:15-16). They should be confident that God cares for them, and that their suffering will be for a short while only. Later, they will share in God's glory (1 Peter 5:6-10). Christians won't be Christ's disciples without carrying the cross. This suffering is not suffering resulting from sinful actions. What "bearing the cross" really is, is patient and obedient suffering, because of Christ.²⁹

Christians, who publicly confess and admit that they believe in Christ, will suffer tribulation and trial (Mark 13:12-13; Rev 17:6; 20:4). The great tribulation that has to come upon mankind has already started with the passion of Christ, and will continue until the coming back of the Messiah.³⁰

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 65-67.

²⁸ John G. Strelan, *Where Earth Meets Heaven: a Commentary on Revelation*, Adelaide SA: Open Book Publishers, 1994, pp. 140-141.

²⁹ J. N. D. Kelly, *The Epistles of Peter and of Jude*, London UK: Adam & Charles Black, 1969, pp. 8-9; Haar, *Suffering and the Christian*, p. 30.

³⁰ Piper, "Suffering and Evil", p. 452.

Believers have to understand that there is suffering on earth. All people have to face suffering, whether believers or unbelievers. Suffering comes through different ways. Humans produce suffering themselves, through self-love, greed, and the love of the world. Believers can't escape this type of suffering either, because they are in the world. But, through their endurance of suffering, and continuing to follow Christ while suffering, the atoning work of Christ, and the glory of God, comes clearly out into the light.³¹

Believers also face suffering because of opposition to Christ and His message. The power of this earth hates the light of Christ. That is why believers have to suffer – because the power of the world doesn't want the light to shine on the people who are in darkness (Matt 5:10-12).³²

Another thing we realise in suffering is that it helps us to think of others. When we are in suffering, it helps us to think of others and hold our “redemptive hand to them (rather than to judge, criticise, and condemn them)”.³³ We can look at Jesus in His last agonising hours at Calvary: where He arranged for His mother to stay with John, He opened the gates of Paradise to an undeserving thief, and He prayed, asking His Father to forgive the sins of those who crucified Him. Here, we can see that, in the pain and death of Christ, His love, patience, mercy, and heart for others, reached out freely to the needs of those around Him.³⁴

God's people wondered about why there is suffering. We can see that, when they put their trust in Him, they found meaning and purpose, even in suffering.

3. A Lutheran Perspective about Suffering

A. Martin Luther

What did Martin Luther think generally about suffering? He said that the gospel speaks about two things concerning suffering. Firstly,

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Lindell, *The Mystery of Pain*, p. 46.

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 46-47.

Luther talks about the shame, disgrace, and suffering people have to face for the sake of the gospel. He called this “cross-bearing”. Secondly, he talks about suffering from sickness, trouble, and afflictions, occurring because of natural causes. This is, properly speaking, not a cross, said Luther, but an affliction.

What did Luther believe about Christians suffering affliction? He said that people naturally try to find out in what way they may have offended God for Him to send this suffering. But, here, Luther is saying that God isn’t sending that suffering, but the human conscience thinks that way.³⁵

Christians understand clearly that God loves them, and superintends all evil and suffering in their lives. But when there is suffering, Christians, too, ask questions about the love of God. Is God hostile to me? Has the Lord forsaken me? But, Luther said we shouldn’t judge these situations with out natural beliefs, but we should judge, and find answers, through the Word of God. When we don’t judge with the Word of God, Luther said that our judgment will be wrong, and it will mislead us. We will think that every form of suffering is a punishment from an angry God.³⁶

What does the word of God say? Firstly, it shows us that God loves us, and that not a single hair can fall from our head unless it is the will of God (Matt 10:30). In here, we can say that, whatever suffering and evil comes, it can’t do anything against Christians, unless it is the will of God (Matt 10:29). From God’s word, we can be sure that God values the lives of human beings more than the sparrows.

Secondly, Luther speaks about suffering as “cross-bearing”. When someone is persecuted or suffers because of faith in Christ, he calls this “cross-bearing”. When someone has shame, suffering, and disgrace before the eyes of the world, and is considered wrong (for

³⁵ Ewald M. Plass, *What Luther Says: a Practical In-Home Anthology for the Active Christian*, St Louis MO: Concordia Publishing, 1959, pp. 10-12.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

instance, when a person suffers persecution for the sake of the gospel) – this is “cross-bearing”.³⁷

Some good examples of people who bore suffering for the sake of the gospel are John Huss, Jerome of Prague, and many others. The world accused them of heresy, and they were put to shame, just like our Saviour Jesus Christ, and were martyred.³⁸

Luther said that Christians have to be prepared to suffer, too. There are natural disasters, and the devil also will bring misfortune to us. But Luther encourages us to get strength from prayer. Prayer is another thing we have to consider in times of suffering.³⁹

Suffering is called a cross when we come by it. However, when we are the cause of our own suffering, Luther doesn't call that a cross we have to bear. It is clearly stated that, in the Bible, Christians don't carry their own cross, but Christ's cross. Christians must suffer for Christ's sake. This means Christ suffered on the cross, and we will also suffer, because of our belief in Christ.⁴⁰

Luther also suggested that Christ doesn't like those who dislike the cross. He believed that, if you want to be a joint heir with Christ, yet not suffer with Him, He will not acknowledge you on the last day as a brother/sister. Luther saw that Paul challenged Christians also to bear the cross of Christ (Gal 6:17).⁴¹

Luther talks about thanking God while suffering, instead of cursing God. The more unjust suffering we bear for the sake of the gospel, the better it is for us, Luther says, therefore, we should accept such a cross and thank God for it.⁴²

Luther also distinguished two different aspects of God: the revealed God, and the unrevealed God. People, all the time, talk about

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 355.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 356.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 357.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 356.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 359.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 362.

the unrevealed God. They naturally think of His great power and strength. They fear His angry judgment on their sins. Also, when they see God only in this way, their narrow perspective about suffering and evil is that it comes only from God – from offending Him, because of some sinful action.⁴³ But Luther also said we have to see God through Jesus Christ as the revealed God. In Jesus Christ, especially in His suffering, God's personality towards mankind is revealed clearly.

The revealed God is the God who speaks to mankind. Through the incarnation, God revealed Himself to mankind. The Word, in the beginning, became flesh, and lived among us as a human being. God reveals Himself clearly through Jesus Christ, who was not a powerful person by the standards of this world. In His suffering and death on the cross, which looks like defeat and weakness, God's power over sin is revealed.⁴⁴

Luther strongly emphasised that God is known through suffering. Through the suffering of Christ, we can really see the love, peace, joy, and care of God. The weakness of God in Christ, and His suffering, tells us that our human strength is not worthy, or able, to set us free from suffering.⁴⁵

Luther sometimes disagrees with people who promote a theology of glory. They don't think about the suffering side of Christ. They think only about the glory side of Christ. Luther disagrees, because people forget the great suffering God endured on the cross, and they only think about His healing and miraculous power. They don't want to face suffering in their lives. Luther also said that people, who are enemies of the cross of Jesus, are also enemies of their own cross. This simply means they don't want to go through suffering. They feel and understand that suffering is for heathens, or for those whose faith is not

⁴³ Kolb, *Christian Faith*, p. 20.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁴⁵ Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, Philadelphia PA: Fortress Press, 1966, p. 28.

strong. They also interpret that suffering was defeated already by Christ on the cross, and there is no suffering for Christians today.⁴⁶

The theology of the cross is not the natural thinking of humans. But it is God's way. All God's wisdom, love, salvation, and grace are hidden in the suffering of Christ. God's power doesn't appear directly, but it is hidden in the suffering of Christ. In other words, we can say that the grace, love, and peace of God is hidden in disaster and suffering. Luther believed that, in times of suffering, you will clearly see the presence of Christ near.⁴⁷

We can understand that Christ is with us in times of suffering and disaster. Christ never leaves us. Also, we can see that suffering is not only for heathens, but also for Christians. Christ works with people, through suffering and troubled times. The suffering of Christ, in the world's eyes, reveals helplessness and defeat. But, through that, God showed victory, power, peace, salvation, and love. In other words, we can say that it is not through strength, might, and power that people will be saved, but it is through weakness, defeat, and suffering that victory will be won.⁴⁸

The world hates suffering, but, through suffering, God turned such elements of suffering as the cross and death into the reality of salvation. Luther's understanding of the theology of suffering is that God hides Himself through suffering. God works in opposite ways to how people think. God has the power to create something out of nothing. But God shows His strength and power through weakness and defeat. God's life works in death, and His strength in helplessness.

When the understanding of people about the suffering of God is limited, then their understanding about God is limited. If people want to understand God's love and peace they need to understand His suffering, and they need to understand their own suffering. People, who hate Christ's suffering, hate their own suffering. People, who

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

question their own suffering, also question Christ's suffering. People, who love their own suffering, love Christ's suffering.⁴⁹

Luther didn't separate glory from suffering. The real glory of God is revealed in His suffering. The glory is revealed through the suffering of Christ. If there was no suffering, we could say that there wouldn't be any glory. Glory, peace, and love were revealed through suffering.⁵⁰

From Luther, we learn what our natural beliefs will tell us when we are suffering. They will say that you must have sinned for this to happen. They will ask: "Where is God? Why has He forsaken you? Why does He judge you with this suffering?" But Luther urges us to cling to the promise in God's word in the midst of suffering. Luther points us to God, as He is revealed clearly in Christ Jesus.

B. As a Pastor, How am I Going to Minister?

1. Syncretism

It will be very dangerous for pastors to preach about suffering and evil to the congregation, without the people getting the wrong idea. Melanesian people were, and are today, heavily involved with spirits. They had, and are going through, practices about healing in their everyday lives. They have seen the outcome of their beliefs and practices. This practice isn't a Western philosophy, which was introduced into Papua New Guinea. Western people are surprised to get some of the answers that some people give. Melanesians have seen, touched and felt the outcomes of their beliefs in their everyday lives. So, pastoral workers have to be very careful, because Imbongu people, in their practices, might not really have any space for Christ.

We have to put Christ in the centre of the healing practices. Beliefs about the spirits have to be replaced with a belief in Christ.

Amo, in his article, has also suggested something about suffering and healing in his area. Healing practices were performed to save the

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

life of someone, who was suffering from sickness. All this healing was done to bring happiness to the individual, family, community, tribesmen, and the society, altogether. Like that, God, too, did save us to bring happiness and unity in our lives.⁵¹

The Imbongu people wanted to get well from their suffering. They wanted to see a positive outcome from their suffering and healing rituals, and they wanted to see the answer with their eyes, immediately. That is a big difference from biblical teaching. Imbongu people are not prepared to suffer, and bear sickness, in their life. They only want to get well, and see a positive outcome. This is different from Christian faith in the Lutheran church.

Many people choose to follow churches and preachers, who promote healing power, rather than endure suffering. When the people see a healing miracle taking place in their life, they think that Christ is really working, and is present. Melanesian people want to get well, and live a happy life. They don't want to suffer, or find unhappiness in their lives. Melanesian people search for salvation in their everyday living. Imbongu people found that the cause for sickness was with the spirits, and their relationship with them. That means, too, that, when they see healing taking place, they believe that some spirit power is at work. So, they believe and follow that church preacher, where they experience healing power. They won't want to hear any preaching about suffering. But it is a great danger that people won't believe in the work Christ did on the cross. Instead, they think healing is the great salvation message in the lives of the people. They only believe when they see success, healing, and blessing. They work out how to get this from the spiritual power – the Holy Spirit. They emphasise how to get this spiritual power. They don't emphasise the work of Christ, and that people need to trust Christ's work.

2. Ministering to Suffering Imbongu Christians

The teachings and doctrines of the Lutheran church must be well presented, and taught, in the lives of the congregation. Christians aren't

⁵¹ William Amo, "The Use of Traditional Healing Practices in Christian Pastoral Care", in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 13-1 (1977), p. 46.

taught properly the meaning of suffering and healing, from a Christian perspective. They still hold onto their beliefs about the powers of the spirits to cause suffering, and bring healing.

Suffering is an everyday thing that comes to our lives if we aren't careful in looking after our bodies. Suffering sometimes is caused by bacteria and germs. Suffering is a result of the Fall. It is not necessarily the result of specific sins. People need to be taught to look after their community, and the surrounding materials they use in their everyday life. Hospitals are there to cure sickness. There are Christian medical practitioners, who are highly trained to do that job of curing the sicknesses of the people. Wisdom and intelligence come from God. God gives men the wisdom and ideas to invent new technology and drugs, so why are we going to ignore the wisdom and knowledge God gives us?

The first and most important thing we need to do in our Christian lives is to put Christ at the centre of everything we do. For example, doctors and nurses should pray before and after the working hours of their daily routine in the hospitals. Medicines should be blessed before using them in hospitals.

Healing won't bring God's salvation to men. Healing won't bring freedom to the community and the country altogether. Sometimes, people use power that is not from God to perform miracles. In the Old Testament, we see that Pharaoh's magicians did the same miracles as Moses and Aaron. So, we can see that healing from suffering is not always from God's healing power. Even Satan can use someone to perform healing, miracles, and wonders.

Pastors have to minister when someone is suffering. It is clearly seen in my congregation that, when someone is suffering from sickness or other things in their lives, that often there isn't any ministry taking place at that time. The elders in the congregation say, "Let them suffer, because of their evil doings. Let them feel the pain, and later they can repent and come back to God." Also, they say that suffering is coming from God, and so let it come. That's why they don't bother visiting sick patients, and also witnessing to them.

The first mission work for the church elder, in Imbongu congregations, is to visit all their Christian members, who are suffering. Their presence will make a big difference in times of suffering. Their prayers will be greatly appreciated by the ones, who are suffering.

Elders and pastors shouldn't stand back and look at their congregation members suffering. A pastor or an elder in a church is to look after the sheep of Christ. Christ gave us that job, to look after the people He died to save.

Visitation by church workers of suffering people will be a great thing to do. In good times, Christians won't worry about you visiting them, but in times of suffering they need your presence. That is the time they want to see who is their real *wantok* and helper. So, that is the time for us, as servants of Christ, to do our mission work, to show clearly that Christ is with them in times of suffering. And also, to show them that their relationship with Christ can grow stronger in times of suffering.

In this ministry of visitation, too, there is a problem. The problem is this: a pastor or church worker will regularly visit a suffering person that he or she knows personally. But a person, with whom they don't regularly associate, will be visited once or twice a month. This shows us clearly there is a problem in this ministry. This problem can be identified as the "*wantok* system". An elder in the church, or a congregation member, will only visit a person, who is suffering from sickness, if he or she is their *wantok*. If they aren't their *wantoks*, they don't bother much about them, and they won't pay much attention to them. If this *wantok*-system-visitation occurs regularly, other suffering people will think that they haven't got any friends. Where are the so-called Christian friends and church workers? And this question will further lead them to ask: "Where is Christ? Is Christ nearby to help me? When will Christ heal my suffering? Is Christ not my *wantok*?" These questions are produced by the actions of Christians towards suffering people.

If we really want to show Christ in times of suffering, we have to break the barrier of the "*wantok* system". We, as Christian friends in Christ, have to treat every suffering person equally. We have to show

clearly to everyone the good news we preach. We shouldn't only visit the people we know as *wantoks*. As Christians, we carry the light of Christ when we visit everybody, whether *wantoks* or not. In this way, the suffering person will truly see the presence of Christ in times of suffering. They will see the presence of Christ through us, and feel and understand that, even if their suffering is not removed from them, still Christ's presence is there with them in times of suffering, and, through that, their faith will be strengthened.

Another area to look at is in the correctional prisons. That is another place where people are suffering. They need workers of the church, and also Christian friends, to go and visit them. They can talk with them, pray with them, and also ask them what they are feeling when they are staying in prison. In this way, they get to know more about the treatment they are getting in prison. And we can look for some ways to help them with the treatment they are getting, by talking to the authorities in charge. There are times when the workmen treat the prisoners cruelly. Officers often don't know of that problem within the disciplinary forces and the prisoners. A church worker has the duty to talk to the officers in charge to enable them to look into the matters, and, through this, we can help the people who are suffering in the prisons. The prisoners will understand that there is someone who has a concern for them. Through this, the people will see Christ clearly in times of suffering.

Another area, where I see a need for improvement in ministering to the Imbongu people, is in times of funeral activities. When someone dies, or a father or mother of a Christian dies, there is no visitation from Christian friends or church workers. In Imbongu society, your presence is important when a family is in sorrow, worry, and pain. They feel that they have lost someone in their family, who would contribute something in family affairs. That is the time when they feel that someone has to come close to them, and strengthen them in their faith, in their time of worry. But often, Christians and elders leave them alone. They think that the family of the dead person are Christians, and they can have devotions by themselves. This brings up another lot of questions. What kind of church am I following? What kind of Christian friends have I got? And these questions will lead them to say

that, if I stay on with these people, they are going to do the same thing when I am in trouble, pain, and worry. Many times, a Christian community fails to provide the support – the love and concern of Christ – in a visible way to the suffering.

Even if they are not blood relatives, Christians should see the very real ministry of love and concern they can show when people are suffering the death of a relative.

When people are left alone in their suffering, they will naturally have fears and doubts. It will be natural for them to think that God must be punishing them for something, or God must have forsaken them. More than ever, traditional beliefs will come up again in times of suffering, causing great fear and distress in the victim. In such times, it is hard for them to cling to God's promise. This is our ministry to the suffering: to bring them the good news that they can't naturally feel, see, or hear in their suffering. We must be the messengers. We must bring the good news: showing them what God in Christ is really like.

Conclusion

In this paper, I found out that Imbongu people lived in a world, where spiritual beings and powers are very real. Their lives were heavily dependent on the spirits, whether they experienced help or harm. Suffering and disasters have spiritual causes, according to Imbongu traditional beliefs.

Many Christians, too, believe that suffering is caused by turning away from God. We have sinned, so God sends suffering into our lives to awaken us from our wrong doings, and to cause us to repent, and come back to Christ. So, some people think that, if they have faith, they will never face suffering!

In my research, I found out that suffering can come to heathens, and also Christians. For example, in the Aitape tsunami disaster, believers and unbelievers were affected, not only sinners. And this fact disqualifies the teachings and beliefs of many Christians that suffering is always caused by the particular sins of individuals.

Research in the Old Testament shows that suffering enters our lives, because we live in a fallen world. The disbelief of Adam and Eve brought suffering to this world, and that means people, living on this earth, will face suffering, whether they are Christians or heathens. But the Old Testament, too, shows us that suffering and evil are under the divine control of God. This means suffering will enter our lives, but won't take us away from God.

In the New Testament, too, I found out that suffering isn't a judgment from God to Christians, because Christ has taken the punishment for sin in our place. This doesn't mean Christ took suffering out of our lives, but that Christ broke its power, and promised that it can't destroy us. We are protected by the blood of Jesus Christ. Through suffering, we can come to a much closer relationship with God, by trusting in Him, and not ourselves.

Luther understood that the Bible talked about two things concerning suffering:

- Cross-bearing: that is, when someone suffers persecution for the sake of the gospel.
- Affliction: that is, when someone suffers persecution and disaster because of natural causes.

But he believed that suffering and persecution won't remove us from the kingdom of God. Luther also said that Christians have to be prepared to face suffering. They shouldn't only trust God when they see success, health, and blessing in their lives. Even when facing suffering, Luther taught that Christians should put their trust in God, as He has been revealed clearly in Jesus Christ.

Lastly, when ministering to suffering people, we have to clearly show Christ in times of suffering. We have to visit suffering people, and strengthen them in their faith with God. Christians tend to doubt God's presence and love, when they face suffering. We have to let suffering people know that God is there with them. Through our ministry, we have to reveal what God has done for them, through Christ crucified on the cross. The church has to show Christians what God is

like, not just from their experiences of blessings or suffering, but also from how He revealed Himself through His suffering for us in Jesus Christ. Our ministry must focus on bringing this central message to suffering people, in our words and actions.

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