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**How Does God Wrestle with the Shortcomings
of His People**

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Introduction

From the time of creation through history to the present; man's shortcomings is a common phenomenon. Man has displayed flagrant disobedience to God who created the world and everything in it. Likewise, God has had to cope with these shortcomings of man in diverse ways, with a lot patience, longsuffering and at times discipline.

God's nature consists of holiness, righteousness and justice. These attributes of God determine His ideal, desire and expectations from His covenantal people. The above suggests that God expects His people among other things to exhibit His communicable qualities which mark Him out as the Almighty God.

It must be established in the heart of all that when it comes to keeping God's standards, it is not negotiable. There is no sacred cow before God. So, God ultimately punishes our sins and shortcomings but in His own way. This is what makes God's attention and response to our shortcomings unique and decisive. God demands as of right the confession and repentance of the offender. While it is the responsibility of God's people to return to Him after sin, we have to state here however, that God at different times has sought for His people taking the initiative to be reconciled to His people who are recalcitrant in the Old Testament.

A. Old Testament Approaches to How God Wrestles with Our Shortcomings

A detailed look at the Old Testament section of the Holy Bible reveals that God, at different times had initiated different approaches aimed at dealing with the shortcomings of His people. These various ways portray God in the light of having to wrestle with His people's pitfalls. They include:

1. The Law

We have to begin this, by stating that God began His search for man's return to the ideals of His nature by first introducing the law to serve as a guide among His people. Gwam notes that God at several occasions covenanted Himself to His chosen people Israel; and through this covenantal relationship, the people get to know what God expects of them. He goes on to point out that some of these covenants includes, Abrahamic, Noahic and Sinaitic covenants etc.

In all these covenants, the mission of God is to make His people come closer to Him and enjoy the benefits of His Almightyness. Suffice it to say that, at Mount Sinai, God entered into covenant relationship with Israel. This covenant which was mediated by Moses is where God handed the decalogue (Ten Commandments) and other levitical and deuteronomical law codes through Moses to His people. The aim of the law is to ensure the well-being, peaceful and harmonious living among the covenantal people. Moses desired to see God's glory. What is God like? Exodus 34: 5-8 Then the lord came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the LORD (Yahweh) and he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, the LORD (Yahweh), the comparative and gracious God, slow to anger abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished: he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation. Moses bowed to the ground at once and worshipped with God as the subject.

God wants us to know him truly as he is not just to have vague feelings or bright visions about him. Knowing his greatest glory which is in his inmost character; his goodness, his uprightness, his love.

The two words, compassionate and gracious, are found together 13 times in the Old Testament. The Hebrew word that is translated compassionate is *raham*, and the singular *reham/ raham*, is the word for womb which implies the tender care shown to an helpless infant. This shows how patient God is, in dealing with sinners¹. The word *hanan*; 'to be gracious' or 'to show favour' occurs 41 times in the Old Testament. This implies an undeserved favour. It is love but for the undeserving. The New Testament uses the Greek word Charis for this.²

The phrase 'slow to anger' (*erek appayim*) is listed with the LORD's attribute seven times (see Ex. 34:6, Neh. 9:17; Ps 86:15; 103:8, Joel 2:13; John 4:2, Num. 14:8.) His slowness to anger is linked with his love, *hesed* which occurs 246 times in the Old Testament.³

The constancy of God is also seen in the great word *'emet* (faithfulness) with its root in the truth.⁴

Despite God's love, he does not leave the guilty unpunished. His slowness to anger does not reduce His white-hot zeal for righteousness⁵.

To this end, Priests, Kings, Judges, Prophets and Seers are to ensure the safe keeping, revival and obedience to the law. Unfortunately, the law failed in that the people could not obey the law. Consequently, God continued His struggle with our shortcomings.

2. Sacrifices and Offerings

Man's inability to robustly obey the law propelled God to continue His search and quest for man's return to His ideals. Conversely, man was not able to return to God through the law; God therefore introduced offerings and sacrifices. Here, Aaron the Priest, his sons and Levites were to play a prominent role in brokering peace between God, Israel and the individual offenders, through these differentiated sacrifices and offerings as spelt out by God in the Old Testament.

The priest, according to God's ordination, is empowered to officiate in each of these sacrifices, thus, bringing forgiveness to the offender. On the Day of Atonement two goats are presented to the Priest. According to the Levitical law, he is required to lay his hands on the heads of the goats and confess the sins of God's people on their behalf; after which one is slaughtered for sacrifice and the other is sent into the wilderness as '*escape goat*'. Although this is an annual event, which the high Priest must perform in other that God might be at peace with His people. There were other sacrifices prescribed for different sins. However, the situation worsened because sacrifices only covered sins; it does not wash it away, and because the rich could easily bring the animal for the sacrifices, sin increased, the rich and the mighty marginalized and cheated the poor and the down trodden. Again, God became fed up with the whole process that He cautioned His people that if He were hungry for meat He would not tell them for He knew where the best were in the bush... but let righteousness, peace and justice flow like rivers of waters.

3. Judges, Prophets and Seers

Eventually, Old Testament sacrifices and offerings could not again bring a permanent solution to the recalcitrance and the fall of

God's people. Instead, a big gulf existed between God and His chosen race. This resulted in God severally and at different times and places introducing judges through whom He judged the sins of His people and at times grant them deliverance from the lands of their captors and oppressors.

In diverse ways, places and times, God raised prophets and seers not only to expose His mind and will to His people but also to warn them of the result of and the impending danger that follows their continuous sinful ways. Some of these prophets adopted different styles for different situations in order to drive their message home and summon God's people to a life synonymous with what God demanded in His word (law). Yet all these failed.

These shortcomings were summarized by God as disobedience, arrogance, stubbornness, rebellion, unbelief etc. The above God's agents were to speak against the wiles of God's people in disobeying God's instructions and call them back to God through repentance. Yet, the people could not obey God's word from the mouth of His prophets and seers.

God's ability to put up with all the faults of His people is characteristic of Him and stamps Him out as an ever loving, patient and caring God' who, despite His anger against our shortcomings still finds a place to forgive and restore us to seasoned fellowship with Him. This, she points out, is God's special way of wrestling with His people's shortcomings. Gwam agrees with Josephine that though God punishes sin; yet in love He leaves a remnant. In love, He offers mercy and graciously justifies them. These are God's characteristic way of dealing with our shortcomings in the Old Testament.

B. African Context

How does God react to the shortcomings of Africans? How does He feel about our recalcitrance? What hope does Africans have in the agenda of God concerning the world? These apparently seeming simple questions shall dominate our thought under this heading.

Let us state at this juncture, that Africa largely described as '*dark continent*' by the world is not so described because sun does not rise nor set on her, it is not also based on the complexion of the inhabitants of the continent for there are whites also, it is neither the level of civilization and development; for truly, Africa is the cradle of civilization and development (Egypt) in the whole world. So, what

then is the reason why Africa is regarded and brandished '*dark continent*'?

Africa is notoriously religious, but seriously misguided; Bon Nwabuko⁶ observes that Africa has a strong idolatrous background. Our forefathers worshiped idols of assorted types and powers; and through this idol worship, did a lot of evil, practiced obnoxious and wicked things through witchcraft, wizardry and rituals. All these were evil in the sight of God and attracted God's wrath on the continent. These are the reasons why Africa is regarded as Dark Continent. So that the one time cradle of civilization and development is now almost the most backward continent on the globe. Backwardness in education, technology and science together with corruption and destruction of lives and property etc, is most rampant in Africa. The culture of impunity is also, highest in Africa.

Amakiri notes that in trado-cultural Africa, gods and goddesses passed judgments fast and instant in order to forestall breakdown of already laid down rules. These rules and regulations according to him; when broken attract commensurate penalties to serve as deterrent to others who might be contemplating the same offence. Such gods who passed judgments instantly in Africa include: amadioha, songo, idigwu, mkpitime to mention a few. What is more? They act according to their impulses, that is, upon invocation by their adherents and worshippers. As soon as they gave them what they require they move to strike in obedience to their invocationists.

Josephine⁷ points out that it is this special feature, characteristic of African gods; that is, fast and instant judgment meted to offenders that marks them out and makes their adherents to have more confidence and faith in them. This also, makes idol worshippers renege and reject the gospel of Christ in the posture that He does not act fast, He does not answer prayers fast and He does not give instant judgment to offenders of morality and civics.

Africans faithlessness in God Almighty constitutes serious pains to God; in that we negate our covenantal relationship and fellowship with Him. God has had to cope and at the same time wrestle with our shortcomings particularly in the area of our lack of faith and obedience to Him. Bon and Josephine argue that the reason for the above is that some typical Africans do not seek God for whom He is

but for what they hope to get from Him. They posit that this constitutes serious pain to God.

Irrespective of the pains caused God by our shortcomings, recalcitrance and faithlessness. It must be borne in mind that God is patient, loving, caring and gracious. Since God's covenantal people are not forthcoming as expected; and His love is spread abroad on all men. It became the responsibility of God, that is, God took it upon Himself to reconcile man back to Himself. He did this by initiating the move through mediating the new covenant by the blood of Jesus Christ through suffering and dying on the cross of Calvary.

C. The Message of the Cross

The cross, in the light of our discussion is a long vertical piece of wood with a shorter piece across it near the top. Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary says that in the past people were hung on crosses and left to die there as punishment. It continues that the cross on which Jesus Christ died is the symbol of Christianity.

As a historical artifact, the cross is the undisputed implement of Jesus of Nazareth's death. Crucifixion was commonly employed by Roman officials as a method of execution that time and place, and the historical claim that Jesus was crucified is virtually universally accepted.⁸

The cross in its penal function is a place of suffering for law breakers and offenders. It carries the impulse of agony, torment, pain and eventual death for its victims. Suffice it to say, that the cross is Roman government's way of inflicting capital punishment on non Roman citizens; hence, Jesus became a victim of death on the cross, upon the demand from Jews and the authentication by Pilate.

Let it be succinctly emphasized here, that the message of the cross is one of suffering and pain couched on the Jewish people's rejection of Christ Jesus as the Messiah and Saviour of the world. The Jews considered Him to be an impostor who merely blasphemed by claiming to be the Son of God. It shows the presence of God wrestling with the inadequacies of man. The cross is a symbol of redemption. God the son, was incarnate in Nazareth having taken on human nature, he saved humankind from sin, death, and the consequences of the Fall by his death and resurrection, through which he was also made known to be the Christ (God's anointed one, the Messiah)⁹ Gwam¹⁰ opines that Christ's death on the cross is the

ultimate salvific way of God in wrestling with the shortcomings of His people.

God did not spare His Son, but delivered Him up to be crucified. By dying as a criminal in between two criminals, He became associated with sinners, but He knew no sin and successfully took over the penalty of death for sinners. Ultimately, He became the paschal lamb for the salvation of mankind. Roman 3:23 states that “*all have sinned and come short of the glory of God*”. Christ’s death on the cross essentially took away the wrath and punishment of God upon man, replaced it with patience, love, longsuffering and forgiveness.

Through this, Christ became both sacrifice and high priest what became revolutionary in this configuration was the finality of Christ’s sacrifice and the inauguration of direct access to the Holy of Holies. This ushered in the priesthood of all believers¹¹

The Climax of Christ’s death on the cross is that, the blood of Christ which is the seal of the new covenant is what achieved peace between God and man and ultimately but perfectly too dealt with sin and disobedience of man against God. The cross is God’s perfect and final way of dealing with the shortcoming of His people, the salvation of man was achieved by Christ’s death on the cross.

D. God Continues to Wrestle with the Shortcomings of His People

The message of the cross and the benefits of man’s salvation are inseparably linked. Man, in God’s sight, was in the state of fallenness. All approaches adopted by God to restore man to full fellowship with Him proved abortive.

So, through the incarnation, God emptied Himself in Christ Jesus, on the cross He carried the sins of the world, reconciled man to God by brokering peace between God and man; and set a new stage for approaching and worshipping God; which is only through Christ Jesus, by His willing death on the cross. He made atonement for sins. Atonement or “at-one-ment” (a 16th c. term) refers to the re-establishment of the proper relationship of sinners with God. It has come to be applied specifically to the significance of Christ’s crucifixion, understood in the context of the broader issues concerning redemption, salvation, reconciliation, and the renewal of human life.¹²

Even through salvation is by grace through the merit of Atonement done by Jesus Christ, the individual has to fulfill certain conditions. There must be the preaching of the word, which has to be responded to in repentance and conversion through faith in the efficiency of Christ's atoning work. Someone has to preach the message of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Romans 10:14 states that "how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard?" On the proclamation of the good news Fatokun quoting Richardson says:

In the New Testament we find three words used: *evangelizesthai* (to preach good tidings), *Katangelleon* (to declare, or announce), and *kerussein* (to proclaim as a herald). The fundamental idea of these words is the telling of news to people who had not heard it before. That is, proclaiming Jesus as the only way to salvation. This will bring forth a godly sorrow that will encourage a newness of life with Jesus. Performance of water and Holy Ghost baptism take place so that the individual life can be truly regenerated.¹³

The salvation which Jesus achieved on the cross of Calvary is in two dimensions: The here and now, which is that the believer is empowered to enjoy the graciousness of God as they continue in the process of being saved. The salvation is consummated at '*parousia*' (second coming of Christ) to take all those who believe and accepted Him as LORD and SAVIOUR to a place of eternal bliss and joy.¹⁴ This is when those who believe in Jesus Christ shall shine as light and be joyful because they have entered into the everlasting blessedness of God.

The problems of sinners are seen as bondage to the power of evil from which they are redeemed by paying a ransom. Christ through his death paid this ransom as stated in Mark 10:45. "The son of man came to give his life as a ransom for many" Sin is viewed as a disease that is healed through the atonement of Jesus.

During the Christian middle ages in the West, God was likened to a feudal overlord, whose honor is offended by human sin. Therefore, it is believed that sinners owed God a debt of honor that humans cannot pay. According to Anselm, this requires either punishment or satisfaction and Christ offers this being both divine and human. Christ bore the full force of God's wrath on the cross, the guilt of sin, having been transferred from sinners to him. This logic of punishment has been heavily criticized based on its moral and legalistic rigidity and has also been considered by some as "divine

child abuse”. Thomas Aquinas among others, consider the death of Christ as a sufficient, super abundant satisfaction for the sins of the whole of humankind.

It is believed by the modern liberal theologians that atonement changes humans. God expressed his love for sinful humanity on the cross.

Right there on the cross, he wrestled with human rebellion but the love expressed now evokes gratitude in the believers and brings forth a change in human attitude. Some scholars regard this as “moral influence” theory.¹⁵

1. The Help of the Holy Spirit

God wrestles with the shortcomings of man through the Holy Spirit. God the father knows that the flesh must be dethroned and the spirit enthroned.

Galatians 5:24-25:

And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the spirit, let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.

The flesh must be dethroned and the spirit enthroned. The flesh should no more dictate what we do. We are not to satisfy the desires of the flesh but rather, that of the spirit of God. At the new birth, the flesh is crucified. Paul used three analogies in Romans that can help us here. The analogy of Baptism. At baptism, when we are immersed in the river, we die with Christ and we are brought out of it, we resurrect with Christ. It shows that at the moment, we are dead to sin, the desires of the flesh, and alive to Christ, and at this moment, we are in a new relationship, a new covenant, the laws are now entrenched in our hearts, we now have new interests, to please God in all our ways. This is made possible by the power of the Holy Spirit. The spirit of God is the one that energises us to do the will of God, to fear God.

Paul also used the analogy of the slave market. He explains that, when we were once slaves to sin, we had no choice but to obey our master, just like a slave would be ordered around. But when a slave dies, if the master liked, he could give a million orders, the slave in death, would not bulge. But a Christian who is now saved, he or she is no more under the lordship of Satan and sin, rather he/she operates, and is alive to Jesus and the help of the Holy Spirit. This by

implication means the dethronement of the flesh and the enthronement of the spirit of God. For a better understanding, we shall look at his third analogy. This deals with marriage. Just like death annuals marriage and the other party is free to re-marry, the believer, is the wife that dies to the law. This is because, the law, the former husband is holy, it is the law of God and cannot die. But the believer, the wife dies to the law and rises up in a new relationship with Jesus. Paul in Romans chapters 6&7 makes it clear that as a Hebrew of Hebrews, a Pharisee of Pharisees, who knew the law, he knew it was not easy to obey the law. The slogan under Judaism was ‘come and obey the law in order to be saved’ but now he knows better, in Christianity, it is ‘come and be saved so as to be able to obey the law.’

Romans 8: 6-8

To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the spirit is life and peace. For this reason, the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

It becomes necessary for us to dethrone the flesh because we are no more debtors to the flesh to live by the flesh.

Romans 8:13-14:

For if you live according to the flesh, you will die, but if by the spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the spirit of God are children of God.¹⁶

2. Through the Word of God

God also continues to wrestle with the shortcomings of his people through his word. The word of God tells us about God, and we get to know him better. Psalm 119 : 105 says “ your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” through Christ, Christian teachers and the use of the Bible he makes his will known to the people, exhorts and corrects them.¹⁷

3. Through Church Leaders

The church leaders perform sacramental, disciplinary, administrative, teaching, evangelistic and pastoral functions for the spiritual and physical growth of the members of the church. Counseling is also done to solve management problems, family

relation and other issues for members to know what is right and what is wrong.¹⁸

God's righteousness and wrath are both revealed in the good news now only because they were first revealed in the Gospel events themselves. God forgives human beings, but never says that their sin does not matter. On the contrary, both the love of God and the wrath of God are only fully revealed in the one historical event of Jesus Christ crucified at Calvary. When people hear the Good news of the events, they are confronted here and now with both the judgment and the mercy of God.¹⁹

One of the ways God wrestles with the shortcomings of his people is through the creation of death.²⁰

Conclusion

All men are in a fallen state. We have disappointed God because we are not able to please Him and remain in constant fellowship with Him. Through the ages past, God has had to wrestle vigorously to bring man back to Himself. Today, all contemporary Christians know that Christ Jesus is the only final solution provided by God for man's salvation and peace with Him. Backslidden Christians may not accept this fact though. Yet, it is the basic truth regarding man's relationship with God today. It must be acknowledged that man can not save himself, for all men have sinned... Therefore, what is required according to John 1:12 is to receive Jesus Christ into our lives; for He alone gives power to become a child of God and also enter into new and right relationship with God.²¹

Our ability to accept Christ's finished work on the cross with soberness, singleness of heart and faith in Him is one sure way by which we activate the mercy of God on us and ultimately commence a right living before Him. Through Christ Jesus God has redeemed us from our sins and His wrath. All we need do is believe in the efficacy of this finished work on the cross of Calvary.

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