

CHAPTER THREE.

THE CONCEPT OF DEATH.

The oppressive rituals and structures of society has made women in black to ask theological questions about God as well as the concept of death. It also forced them to review death in theological and African terms. Therefore, one needs to ask a theological question about the meaning of death. This issue caused women to experience a painful ritual that humiliates them and men treating them as lesser beings. Then one needs to ask a theological question- about the meaning of death.

3.1 What is death?

Oxford Dictionary defines death as the event which ends life. (Oxford Dictionary:1978:211), whereas the New Bible Dictionary defines death as a biological necessity. It explains death in the following manner:

- 1) physical death- death seems to be necessary for bodies constituted ours are. Physical decay and ultimate dissolution are inescapable.
- 2) spiritual death- here death is a divine penalty as already stated in Rom 6:23 which regards death as the wages of sin (New Bible Dictionary:1993:273)

Before death comes into a picture, we need to note that women experiences it at a wedding ceremonies at times which they should be celebrating their womanhood. I have at many occasions witnessed couples taking vows during a wedding ceremony, the vow that troubles me a lot is that women are addressed a lot around the issue of

“For better for worse, for riches, for poorer.

in sickness and in health,

to love and to cherish

and to honor in the Lord

till death do us part.”

Death is introduced at that time when people should be celebrating. Domination comes to mind as male preachers preach at wedding ceremonies. I often wonder if these vows mean the same to a man as it means to a women. My own assessment is that they are not received the same. For me most men escapes the vow, *“Till death do us apart”*

The above demands a commitment until death. The unfortunate part of this vow is that it was designed mostly for women. For an example, you find that in many cases, after the death of a husband, a women is never allowed to remarry, whereas a man is encouraged to remarry after 6 months or so. Funny enough, never in history of African people a women been encouraged to remarry within such short space of time. If she is encouraged to she then has to take a brother of the deceased. The main idea is to make sure that the children of the deceased remain in the family. Their responses will never be corrected because by so doing I will be violating their humanity. As a narrative researcher I asked my co-researchers (widows) of their understanding about death, (The next chapter will deal with their response and their therapeutic issues.) They came with many answers, just to quote a few answers they said:

The first one responded by saying:

“Death is so cruel, it never crossed my mind that death could divide, people and plant

devious seeds in their minds. To me death should bring people together and help bridge the gap which may exist between them- especially when they bury someone who is part of their life."

The second one said

"People change like chameleons in difficult times and once transformed, they became serpent. They turn their backs on you and became nasty. Forgetting that what comes around goes around."

The third one said:

"Death oppresses. It separates people from their loved ones. I am scared of one day being placed in such an awful situation that will break my heart and turn my life upside down"

Further A single lady responds recalling an experience of her mother in mind during the time of her father's death., she said *"I am afraid, the way my mother was badly treated by in laws, some relatives and neighbors, it made me change my mind, I don't think I want to get married. If what happened to my mother is the way widows are treated. Sorry marriage is not for me."*

Fifth said:

"Death is cruel! It separates lovers. If you want to know more about people who claim to love you, wait until you lose a loved one. Then they often show their true colors and drop the pretence of ever having loved you".

As I was engage with my co-researchers, I noticed that lot of anger was emerging in their

responses. For me, it was like rubbing salt on a wound. I felt that emotionally they were not healed, and they needed someone who will journey with them towards the process of healing and narrative therapy was the way of addressing their anger and grieve.

My co-researcher were full of anger, and it was very difficult not to join them as a women. As a Pastoral Counselor I know that anger is a signal of frustration and oppression, and one worth listening to. Lerner shares an insights about anger that is worth quoting, she says:

“that anger may be a message that we are being hurt, that our rights are being violated, that our needs or wants are not being adequately met, or simply that something is not right” (Lerner:1985:1)

It is true that anger grips us but we are not able to respond, instead we suppress it, especially in an oppressive situation. I saw in the widow’s eyes deep anger, bitterness and sadness. I agree with Lerner’s insights that, these women were hurting inside and are still angry bitter about their oppressive situation. Their rights have been violated. I am also aware that there are widows who have been cared for, and been given full support by members of the family during their bereavement. The reader needs to note that this thesis focuses on those who are rejected, dehumanised and humiliated and marginalized. Kubler-Ross capture the spirit of anger especially when people deal with humiliation and shame brought by members of the family. She says:

“This grief and shame and guilt are not very far removed from feelings of anger and rage. The process of grief always includes some qualities of anger” (Kubler-Ross 1974:4).

In other words, anger helps me to enter into their story and journey with them, reflecting

on their experience which were not allowed to emerge by in-laws.

With the negative answers shared I also believe that it will be wise to continue researching for an understanding of the meaning of death from different perspectives i.e. theologically as well as African perspectives.

3.2 THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE.

Here Kubler -Ross will help us understand what death does when it visits a family. She captures the advancement of science and how people want to deal with the issue of death.

She says:

“The more we are making advancements in science, the more we seem to fear and deny the reality of death”. (Kubler-Ross:1974:7).

Death is a mystery and it is a temporal limit of all finite existence. Its meaning depends on the perspective from which it is viewed, that is biological, psychological, sociological, or theological. In Christian theology death is interpreted in relation to God the Creator, Judge, and Redeemer of life. The death and resurrection of Christ are central in interpreting death. The hopeful realism of a biblically rooted theology of death stands in contrast to both death - denial and death-acceptance in modern culture.

Hick explains it further by saying that:

“Death is our way to God, for those who die are thought of as having ‘gone to God’, ‘are among the saints’, ‘are among the angels’”. (Hick:1976:207)

Hick’s definition is too Western, and does not capture the African side of how African

people view death. This concept will help us to look at the African perspective of death

at a later stage. Let us further explore the issue of death from the Old Testament

3.2.1 The Old Testament

The Old Testament explore the issue of death, especially in relation to the chosen people of God. The book of Psalms are helpful in exploring this issue, e.g.

“Death is a given limit that God has set for all creatures” (Psm.90:10)

As a continual threat to full human life experienced in boundary situations like sickness, loneliness and exile. Since life to us consist in relationship with God, within the covenant community, experiences of alienation from this source are death-like and are feared and lamented. The creation story in Genesis 2-3 view death as the results of a primordial divine curse caused by human sin. In other words, death came into being as the result our sinfulness. The message of hope we have is that, death is

God’s enemy, which will be defeated at the end of history as recorded in Isaiah 26 and in Dan 12.

According to the Old Testament, death is understood in different ways, but the core of the matter is that is that, death is perceived as the will of God, and as a final part of our journey.

3.2.2 The New Testament Perspective

Although the early church affirms that God has acted through Christ to assure final victory over death, tension is evident between seeing death strictly as enemy, and seeing death as resurrection, or as the pattern of God’s way of salvation. For Paul, death is regarded as the wages of sin, (Rom 6:23) and the last enemy (1Cor.15:26), but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom.5:12ff). The good news is that, through his death and

resurrection Jesus has overcome the power which death has held over human life. As Adam brought death into life, so Christ brings new life in the journey of death.

Theologically, we believe that we are all going to die but we will be resurrected from the death, because the resurrection of Christ from death is the basis and paradigm of hope in God's final victory over all evil.

Bernstein says that:

"Life after death is contemplated by theologians of all persuasions. Christians conceive of the road to eternal life as a central focus within the religion, seeing devotion to Jesus as requisite. Within Christianity, however, there are differences among sects, for an example, Protestants feel that God lovingly accompanies a person both to in life and in death. If one has loved God, hope for eternal life in heaven becomes more assured. Catholics also emphasizes God's love. Death is perceived as the will of God. Catholics regards attainment of eternal life as a goal that shapes patterns of behavior and religious standard.

Some religious Jews believe in life after death for the soul, without viewing it as a reward, although other Jews are unsure about events after death and rely upon justice of God's ways"(Bernstein:1977:15).

Africans also have their own side about viewing of death, let's look at how they view death.

3.3 AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE.

Both the Theological and Western view on death did not capture the African side about death. African's have many myths concerning ideas about the origin of death. Some of

them have been recorded whereas some are not. In many myths spreading all over Africa, it is said that God gave people a vessel with a secret in it, and forbade them to open it. Overcome by curiosity or through mistake, someone opened it and death came out and life became painful.

These and many myths emphasize that death came almost by mistake. Even though all myths speak about how death came into being in spite of the above facts. There are no myths in Africa about how death can be overcome or removed from the world. This is the reason Mbiti says that:

“Africans believe that each time a person dies, the death is caused by either sorcery, the spirits, a curse, or natural death. (Mbiti:1986:111)

I agree with Mbiti because I believe that death occurs for a reason. Death is sorrowful, because it is viewed as a separation between this present life and the life to come. That's why death is referred to as returning home, answering a summon, disappearing, fighting a losing battle, sleeping, joining the ancestors. All this proves to us that death is not a complete destruction of life. Life goes on beyond the grave. Hence Mbiti referred to the death as living-death. He says:

“the living-death are bilingual, they speak the language of men(sic) with whom they lived until recently, and they speak the language of the spirits and of God. They are still part of their families, they know and still find interest in the lives of their families. The living-death are the best intermediaries between man and God” (Mbiti:1970:83).

I agree with Mbiti because this proves that life goes on beyond the grave. Therefore people combine their sorrow over the death of someone with the belief that, that is not the end and that the departed continues to live in the hereafter.

That's why African people are so sensitive of what is done when there is death in the family. One of the rituals done is the shaving of hair, the wearing of a black mourning gown for the widow, and a black band around a waist for the widower. The purpose of some of the rituals is to send the departed home peacefully, to serve her/his links with the living and to ensure that normal life continues among the survivors. The main aim is to come to grips with facing death through a process of mourning.

People especially women wail and weep, lamenting the departure of the dead person, recalling the good things the person had done and said during life time, remind themselves that the person continues to live on in the nextworld.

With these perspectives, I find it hard to understand why, after somebody's husband dies, the widow is treated as "*o ne senyama*", literally meaning, "*she is having bad luck*", she is isolated, and marginalized. I wonder what the departed husband says when seeing all the "bad things" done to his dear wife. African people believe that the death are alive as an ancestor, especially those who lived a good life.

With this in mind, I really don't think that he will sleep peacefully, and be able to guard upon us, our children, agriculture and our life stock. I don't think that he will be able to send us rain and blessings as an ancestor. As Setiloane says that:

"if the departed are angry at us, they won't be able to ensure good life to us, the survivors." (Setiloane:1986:19)

As death introduces women into oppression, it will be wise for men to start making wills and write letters which can be left with their lawyers. This will ensure that their partners are not continually abused after their death. Let me share an example,

“In case of my death, please do not harass my wife. She is the mother of my children, and the women I chose and love.

Please let me rest in peace, respect and honor my wish.”

African people have an idiom which says: *“lentswe la mofu le agelwa lerako”* means that the words of the departed must be respected and acted upon.

I believe that if a last wish is made, this ungodly things done to widows could be avoided, and the deceased could rest in peace. Then a women in black can be seen as fully human and be given all the support she needs during her period of great loss.

SUMMARY.

The aim of this chapter is to help us view death from different perspectives i.e African and Western perspectives. This helps us both Christians and Africans to understand death and its impact on us. Idioms and way of dealing with death are used. The OT and NT help us to explore the issue of resurrection and life after death. The next chapter deals with stories of women, using narrative therapy integrating their stories in order to share their experiences of loss.