



■ The late Naomi



■ The two other deceased children and their mother

How Benue woman lost 3 children to midnight fire

- Fears of loosing my children taunted me days before their deaths
- They asked about God in heaven hours before dying

For Mrs Peace Odey, the essence of living truly means little or nothing after she lost three of her children in a midnight fire that occurred two months ago. She shares her story with *Daily Trust* Saturday.

Hope Abah Emmanuel, Makurdi

The incident happened on Friday, December 17, 2021 but the sad memories remain fresh each passing day, according to the 40-year-old mother of four.

"My three children lost to the fire include my first daughter, Naomi 17, who was supposed to write SSCE this year. My third born, Godson Odey, who was 7 and in primary 2, the last child Grace, who turned five in December.

"My first son was spared because he had travelled the previous day to collect his newsletter from school, so he was away from home at the time of the fire incident," she narrated.

Peace had premonitions of the tragedy which befell her family but couldn't exactly figure out the way it had later played out as she narrated that the "fear of loosing my children taunted me days before their death."

Her husband, Odey Ochoche Ikwayatam, who sat close by while they both recounted the bitter episode to our correspondent in Makurdi, also recalled that the deceased themselves had asked him about God in heaven hours before dying in the fire.

The grieving woman further recalled that the sad reality, which had shattered her life, happened while she and her husband slept in their parlour and the three children in the bedroom at the family's residence at the Jesus College Otukpo staff quarters.

She explained that the premonition she had was rather a revelation that was not well understood by her until the unfortunate incident occurred.

"I had a revelation that something would happen because few days before then, I just discovered that I was suddenly fearful of everything. My heart would just be beating and then suddenly, something said what if something bad happens to your children and

I would quickly reject it.

"If I knew this was going to happen, the church would have been my home throughout that period. I wouldn't have even planned for any Christmas at all. I would have packed all my children to go and lay on the altar in church.

"That night, I was so tired that I slept throughout the period of our evening prayer. Maybe my children would have been spared if I had led prayer that night.

"At about 1am, my husband and I were sleeping in the parlour when the girl staying with me tapped me and started shouting fire. I ran outside to get detergent and the water tank to get water to quench the fire.

"At the same time, my husband and I

rushed to our room where our three children were sleeping, it was too late as the fire had engulfed everywhere.

"My husband tried to force himself into the room but it was not possible because of the intensity of the fire. He even got burnt on the face in the process. We didn't hear any sound or perceive any smell and I doubt if it was electrical surge that caused the fire incidence because I don't even have any socket in my room. Neighbours tried to help too but it was too late," she further recounted.

Apart from the fire incident, the bereaved mother relayed to our correspondent another recent bitter experience in the hands of bandits who opened fire on the vehicle she travelled in along Naka Road en

route Makurdi about six months before her children's demise.

She said, "On May 27, 2021, I survived an attack by armed bandits who shot at our vehicle at Naka, killing the driver and some persons in the vehicle. I survived with a gun shot on my back. We were traveling from Otukpo to Makurdi that day. I am recalling all of this just to buttress the point that God answers my prayers."

And that wasn't all for the woman who also survived a kidnapping ordeal six months prior to the bandits' saga.

Peace attributed her miraculous escape from both incidents - kidnap and bandits - to the handiwork of God who always answers her as she regretted that the case of her children wouldn't have been different if only she had prayed enough.

"I and my younger brother were kidnapped in November 2020 in Otukpo. I was later released after four days to go and source for ransom for my brother and I believe God delivered us because I preserved in prayer," she added.

Heaving a deep sigh of anguish, the 40-year-old now left with one child, recalled the last moment shared with her deceased first daughter Naomi, whom she took to the salon to make her hair that fateful day.

She said, "We were together at the salon till evening and had to return home so that we can continue the hair the next day. Unfortunately, that never happened again because she died before morning.

"That fateful day, I also got her an expensive lace fabric and shoe. I took her to the tailor to measure her before we went to the salon to wash and braid her hair. We were at the salon till about 6pm and the stylist couldn't finish the hair before we left."

Meanwhile, Peace's husband, Odey, who is a teacher with Jesus College Otukpo still had on his face scars from the severe burn he secured during his futile attempt to rescue his deceased children.

Odey, 60, wept profusely while he narrated the last moment shared with his children before they went to bed that night.

"My youngest child had asked me earlier that day where God is and when I responded that God is in heaven, she said, I want to go to heaven to see God. They all wanted to see God. We didn't attach any serious meaning to the statement until after the sad incidence.

"I'm a deputy director and staff of the Benue State Teaching Service Board. We live in a two-bedroom apartment at the staff quarters of Jesus College Otukpo. All I can remember was the shout of fire from our young housemaid.

"On 16 December, my children were sleeping in the parlour and after the evening prayer, I told the eldest of my kids to take the younger ones inside the room. She first took Grace the youngest child and then returned to pick Godson and while he was being taken into the room, he shouted, Daddy Daddy, I don't want to sleep inside and I replied that he was sleeping already.

"Later at night, the housemaid started screaming. The next thing I saw was fire everywhere. I tried thrice to force myself into the room where my children were sleeping but it wasn't possible because the fire was too much. That's how I lost my three children in one day."

Though the charred remains of the siblings were buried immediately, the uncontrollable tears of the parents and loved ones continued to linger amid the pains of also losing their entire property to the fire with no place to call their own home at the moment.

Meanwhile, the Benue State Deputy Governor, Engr. Benson Abouonu, Senator Abba Moro and other good spirited people have visited the couple to condole them.

The couple also admitted that Governor Samuel Ortom, had met with them as well as many others who showed concerns to their plight. However, they solicited for prayers to overcome the challenges life has thrustled on them.



■ Peace, the bereaved mother



■ Odey, bereaved father