

A voice told me to jump into well, kill myself

—Enugu businessman who lost wife, four children to house fire

Mr Philip Ogbodo, an Enugu businessman based in Jos, Plateau State, tells **RAPHAEL EDE** about a fire outbreak in his house that claimed the lives of his wife and four children in one night

Tell us your name and what you do for a living?
My name is Maduabuchi Ogbodo. I am a businessman based in Jos, Plateau State.
A few weeks ago, you lost your wife and four children in one night to a fire incident. How did it happen?

The ugly incident occurred on Wednesday, February 24, 2021. I call it a dark Wednesday because I couldn't believe what my eyes saw that day. That day I was at home with my family after returning from work. My wife, Precious, our four children – Rejoice, Michael, Samuel and Angel – and I were cracking jokes. I played with my children while my wife was cooking. I had never played that much with the children. I never knew it was going to be the last time I would play with them. We were playing game on my phone and they kept nudging me. "Daddy play game, play game". I was showing them funny cartoons on the phone and after that I taught them an old song we sang back in my primary school days: "O my home, O my home, when shall I see my home?" As we sang, we marched across the living room. We were just having fun that night.

At about 9.30pm, my wife informed me that the food for my little kid, who was about a year and seven months old, had finished. She said she forgot to tell me earlier. I considered sending my first daughter, who was 11 years, to go and get it, but when I looked at my watch and realised that it was 9.30pm, I decided it was better I went to get it myself.

So, I went out to buy the food but while returning home, I heard the voices of people watching a football match involving Real Madrid at a viewing centre near my house. Though I love watching football, I had not planned to go watch the match that night. But as I was going home and the voices at the viewing centre attracted my attention, I decided to rush home to drop the baby's food that I went to buy and then return to the viewing centre to watch the match. This was some minutes to 10pm and by then we had had dinner. As I dropped the baby's food and wanted to go out, my children persuaded me not to go out but to let us continue our play. But I told them I was tired and that I would go and watch the match since they wouldn't allow me to sleep anyway if I stayed in the house. I told them to go to bed; already their mother had gone to bed. The children insisted I must stay back to continue to play with them but I forced them to go to their room and sleep. The three older children have their own room while the little one sleeps in the same room with the mother and me.

After forcing them to go to bed, I went out and locked the door. I went out to watch the football match, not knowing that I would never see my family again (weeps).

What happened to them?

After the match ended, I was going home but I saw a crowd of people coming towards my direction and I was scared. A lot of thoughts came to my mind. I was wondering if there was a fight or whether hoodlums attacked the area. You know the security situation in Nigeria, and particularly Jos, Plateau State where bandits occasionally attack communities, is not predictable.

I decided I would slow down a bit to understand what was going on. I saw someone running in my direction and I waited. When the person got close, I



asked him, "Bros, why are you running like that? What is the problem?" The person said a house was on fire. I said okay and decided that I would rush down there to see how I could lend a hand to put out the fire. As I was going I saw another man that I knew and I asked him about the burning house. But he told me, "Oh! Bros, it is your house oh!" I didn't understand that he was actually referring to my apartment; I thought he was talking about another apartment in my compound. But on getting home, I couldn't believe my eyes

What type of building is it?

It is a two-bedroom flat bungalow. I tried to enter the house but there was no way. I saw that people had already made some attempt to break the door. After some effort, I was able to break the door further and I then went to the protector at the windows and tried to break it but it was very hard. All that was on my mind was how to get into the house and save my family. I didn't hear anything that people were saying around me. As I attempted to dash into the house a hand pulled me back. I shook off the hand and proceeded in but another hand pulled me back. At that point, a number of people had rushed towards me and they carried me out of the building. As they carried me out, I was struggling to free myself. I was wondering why they were holding me back when my entire family was trapped in the burning house. But they kept telling me to calm down. I saw one of the persons that I watched the football match with at the viewing centre and he asked me if that was my house on fire. He broke down in tears with me. I didn't know he took the risk but he went into the burning house and brought out my wife. He told me that she was still breathing. I checked and saw that she was actually breathing but she was very weak.

A pastor brought his car and rushed her to a nearby hospital. The other person rushed inside the house again and brought out my little baby – my Angel – who was sleeping beside my wife before I left to watch the match. The baby had died. The other three children, who slept in the same room, had already

roasted in the fire. The same person equally brought them out.

What caused the fire?

I don't know. When I left the house, there was power outage but while returning I saw electricity light in the neighbourhood. I just can't tell what happened because if it was an electrical fault, other apartments would have been equally affected.

What is even more surprising to me is how the fire started and stopped at just my two-bedroom flat. While my entire apartment was razed down, the fire did not affect any other apartment in the compound. Again, the fire burnt everything inside the house, including the mattresses, the sofas and the ceiling but the roof was intact. That is one mystery that I am still trying to understand.

I can't understand why a house will be on fire and the two gas cylinders in the kitchen did not explode; I am still surprised that a generator with fuel did not catch fire even when everything around it got burnt. It marvels me what kind of fire it was. That is why when people ask me what happened I tell them I don't know. Whatever happened is open to God who knows every secret. That night what came to my mind was to go and kill myself. A voice came to me and told me to jump inside a well and kill myself. And that was what I wanted to do before someone came to me and said, "Don't cry; do you know that your wife is still alive and you can still have other children?" When the person said that I got encouraged and then started going to the hospital to see my wife.

In what state was your wife when you got to the hospital?

When I got to the hospital with the help of some people, I heard my wife's voice saying, "I want to see

my husband," repeatedly. I immediately gathered strength and I went over to her bed. On seeing me, she threw her hands around me and we hugged. She asked me where the children were, repeatedly. And I told her repeatedly that they were fine. She told me that fire had affected one of her eyes and that she couldn't see clearly. I told her to calm down and relax, assuring her that everything would be alright. She asked me to pray for her – my wife was someone who believed in my prayers but my prayer could not save her – I laid my hand on her and prayed for her and after the prayer, she calmed down. The doctors told me to allow her to rest. But that was the last time I would speak with my wife.

The following day when I got to the hospital she was in a coma. She was on oxygen. I was just praying for her to regain consciousness. I was speaking to her because I believed she was hearing me until the doctor said I should leave her alone, so she could rest. The hospital later gave me a referral note that day to transfer her to the Jos University Teaching Hospital. I told the hospital that it would not be good to take her off oxygen while transferring her to JUTH. I told them to keep her on oxygen that would sustain her till we would get to JUTH. I said there might be gridlock on the road. The hospital ran around and got oxygen. At that point my wife had died but I didn't know.

When they wanted to carry her, I was told to stay back but I insisted I wanted to be there. Then someone called on the phone and said I should come and see the caskets that were made for the children. That was how they tricked me to leave the hospital before they put my wife in an ambulance. I went to see the caskets made for the children.

When I saw the caskets I shed tears and said, "So, this is how my four children will enter caskets one day." I was asking myself if God was still in heaven yet this was happening to me.

Before that incident, did you have any premonition of the tragedy?

On Friday, February 19, 2021 the kitchen in my father's house in the village got burnt. They called me around afternoon that the kitchen was on fire. They said the fire was so heavy that the pots in the kitchen melted. These were pots that had been used for years to make 'okpa'. I said that was a strange fire. But I thanked God that the fire was limited to the kitchen: the main house was not affected and nobody died. I didn't know that a bigger fire was coming.

Do you feel you could have saved the day if you hadn't gone out to watch football match that night?

I don't know. Maybe if I had listened to my children and stayed home that night, God could have used me to save them. Or maybe I would have also died in the fire. I don't know, my life today is by the grace of God. I feel the reason I am still alive today

and did not take my own life that night was because someone informed me that my wife survived the fire, that she was alive.

At what point did you know that your wife had passed on?

Preparations were being made to bury the children in Jos but I told my people that I wanted to take their remains home (Enugu) and bury them in my father's compound. But my people insisted that the children should be buried in Jos and I conceded initially. I thought with that arrangement, I would be able to stay with my wife in the hospital. But then again, that night I called my uncle, who is a traditional ruler, and told him that I would love to carry the corpses of my children home to bury. I told him I would appreciate it if he granted my wish. Though he had earlier refused that request, that time he quickly granted it. He said if I wanted the children buried at home, I should leave Jos and come home the following day. I told him my wife was still in the hospital but he told me that there were people who would look after her. So, I agreed with my uncle and prayed that God would keep my wife while I went home to bury the children. We took off on Saturday morning and got home in the night. I didn't know that the ambulance carrying my children also carried my wife's body. The ambulance and the vehicle I was in travelled separately. It was when we got home that they informed me that my wife was dead.

How has life been after then?

I lack the words to explain how much I miss them. Sometimes sleep just elude me. I am constantly thinking about my wife and the children and how we lived happily together as one family. Though I wasn't wealthy, they were my wealth and they made me happy.