

**Is There Hope in the Midst of Death?
A Paper Towards an African Theology of Hope**

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When I expressed interest that I wanted to write a paper for the Theology Conference, one thing which needed to be done was for me to sign a Writer Acceptance Form. One of the questions on the form was to write two or three sentences about what the writer thought was the most pressing theological issue or concern in the Church of the Nazarene in Africa. The question gave me a hint as to what topic I needed to write on for the conference. Many people would agree with me that one of the pressing issues within the Church in Africa is the need to understand Christian hope. But no adequate knowledge, experience, and appreciation of hope is possible to attain without a clearly articulated biblical theology of death done within the African context.

There is need for the Church in Africa to develop a sound biblical theology of death that will provide the educated clergy, the thinking laity, and the majority of our people with adequate biblical understanding of death. The ultimate purpose of such a task would be threefold. First, it will help our people develop a worldview that is biblical and Christian so that in the experience of death, they should stand strong and firm in their faith and never lose hope. Secondly, our people will continue to grow in the knowledge and faith of our Lord Jesus Christ and of the Gospel so that they will be able to stand against any teaching on death that is contrary to the truth of God's revealed and written word. Lastly, they will be able to identify and resist within their own cultural systems those cultural or religious practices, rites, and ceremonies during death which tend to undermine the reality and certainty of their Christian faith and hope.

It should be pointed out here that developing such a biblical theology of death is an enormous and voluminous task, one that cannot be accomplished in a paper of this magnitude. A good theology of death well researched, articulated, and written would need to address the following

questions: What is death? What is the origin and causes of death? What happens when people die? Where do people go when they die? In what condition are the dead? Who are the ancestors? Where do they live? Is there assurance that the dead will go to heaven or hell? Why do many people in Africa, including Christians, fear death? How should the living relate with those who have died? Is there hope in the midst of death? Where do we find hope in the midst of death? My attempt is not to answer all these issues but to take a piece of the pie and start the ball rolling from there. The question I want to address is: "Is there hope in the midst of death?"

Death is real, natural, and common. It is the experience of everyone. It is a human situation which no person can avoid nor has the ability to resist. When death strikes, it brings with it great emotional effect and impact on those affected. They experience sorrow, pain, loss, grief, disruption of family relationships and fellowships. The impact of it is great and to experience such effects is natural and understood. But the question we need to seriously consider and ponder is; how do we as Christians respond when death occurs? Do we show faith and hope when death strikes or do we show fear of death and lack of faith and hope?

It is a fact that cannot be doubted nor denied that among the many problems facing African Christians today is the fear of death and consequently, lack of hope when death occurs. Death is one of those things people do not want to talk about. Even faithful Christians do not want to speak about death. Few pastors preach or teach about death in their churches. Many pastors preach about death when it has occurred. During funerals it is easy to see people avoid touching the dead body, sitting on the grave or tomb. In Africa generally and Malawi specifically, death is a community affair, a public event which raises sympathy of many people around. The amount of money, time, energy, and attention which is spent on funerals or death related matters is overwhelming and tremendous. A picture that is created is that of hopelessness. It is a known fact that every culture has its own accepted patterns or ways for its people to express grief and sorrow when death occurs. As Africans, one form is by mourning and involving ourselves in some cultural practices, rites, and ceremonies related to death.

To express grief and sorrow is legitimate and natural and nothing is wrong

with this. But when one looks at the amount and extent of mourning that is involved and the priority that is given to our participation and involvement in funeral rites and ceremonies, one wonders whether the primary idea is only that of expressing sorrow or something else. By critically looking at what happens one gets the impression that the people involved in those activities have fear of death and lack of hope. Care must be taken so that our involvement does not raise the feeling that we are trying to appease, please, or worship the dead and society so that we are seen to be good people. The majority of our people would not ascribe to this view. This has been part of their tradition and identity. These cultural practices and rituals have been done and followed strictly as a cultural norm and standard for every good member of society without questioning why they are being done. The majority of our people strongly believe that mourning is done to express sorrow because of death, and the funeral rites and ceremonies are done not to worship the dead but to give them honour and respect which they deserve. But how do we or can we biblically respond to these issues of mourning during death and honouring the dead as Christians?

The Bible approves of mourning in various culturally defined ways (see John 11:30-38, Genesis 50:1-14). It is known that there are certain customs and practices applied to that culture and time alone which may not be valid for all cultures and times. As Christians, however, we have no need to mourn and cry, weep, wail as those who have no hope (1 Thessalonians 4:13). Jesus Christ has power over sin and over death and the grave. *“Death has been swallowed up in victory”* (1 Corinthians 15:54). The believer does not need to fear death.

It is a fact that our involvement in funeral rites is not to worship but to respect the dead. There seems to be evidence in the scriptures that honour was given to the dead in their burial (see Genesis 23:19; 49:29, and 50:25). Proper burial was a sign of respect to the dead and this burial involved ceremonies and mourning according to the customs of that time. However, it should be mentioned that even though there are customs of burial found in the Old Testament or even in the New Testament it does not mean that they are required of us today. But the question of honouring and respecting the dead must be seen in light of what the scriptures teach. It needs to be emphasized here that the African culture has one element that is admirable and desirable which other cultures must learn. This has to do with giving respect and honour to parents and elders in society. It is one of the best

elements in culture that needs to be preserved, maintained, and promoted despite the pressure to let it loose. The church in Africa must support and defend this traditional value and encourage and teach young people to value, respect, and honour the elderly.

Who are the recipients of this honour and respect according to the Bible? Leviticus 19:32 sheds light on this question. The verse says, “*Rise in the presence of the aged, show respect for the elderly and revere your God. I am the Lord.*” This statement from the Mosaic legislation hints that it is proper and pleasing to God for people of all times to show respect to the elderly at all times. It is also seen from the same statement that to show this kind of respect is in some way showing respect for God Himself. Exodus 20:12 talks about the fifth commandment which says, “*Honour your father and mother*”. The command spells out that it is God’s desire that all people should bring honour to their parents. Based on these two passages of scripture, let us answer the question: Who are the recipients of respect and honour? The primary and complete emphasis of the Bible is not on the dead as we emphasize, but the living aged, the living elders, and the living parents.

Those that are living now are the recipients of honour and respect. To these then, we as Christians are commanded to show respect and honour and not to the dead. How is this honour shown? The book of Proverbs 1:8 provides an answer to this question. The living parents must be shown respect by careful consideration of their advice and instruction and by obeying and submitting to them in every way that does not cause them to disobey God (Ephesians 6:1; Colossians 3:20). The best honour one can give to their parents is by living a holy life of godly character and behaviour. If it is honouring the dead the same principle can apply. Let us live lives that are godly and Christ like which will honour and respect memories of our departed ones.

Is there hope in the midst of death? Yes, there is. Why do we fear death then as though there is no hope? Christian hope is grounded in the Lord Jesus Christ who lived, died, and rose from the dead and is now living and reigning in our hearts. As Christians our hope centres on Christ and what He has done in our lives and on His return in glory (1 Peter 1:13). Nowhere does the scripture speak of life without problems. Until Jesus Christ comes again, this world as is will be marked by sin, suffering, pain,

persecution, famine, drought, sickness, poverty, hunger and death. The Christian hope does not depend on what is happening around us in our specific situations and places. Christian hope does not focus either on this life or on the things this life can give such as marriage, education, children, positions, wealth, and achievements, but it solely depends on what Christ has done in our lives, what He has promised in His Word and what He will do when He returns in glory. Listen to the hope giving words of the Apostle Paul in Romans 8:28-39. Nothing will separate us from the love of God; not even demons, spirits of our ancestors, sickness, hunger, poverty, hardship, and death will separate us from the love of God. What remains for the Christian is to believe in Christ and what He has promised in His word. Through Christ alone and by His death and resurrection Christians will have victory and hope in the midst of death.