

Biblical Solutions for Life Issues

Topic 36 – Parenting: The Loss of a Child

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Introduction

In our study of parenting we have looked at the foundations, purpose, and goal of parenting. We then looked at parenting roles or the lifestyle of parenting. Finally, we looked at instruction and discipline. Now we move on to a related difficult topic – how do parents find comfort and glorify God when they lose a young one?

In general, all parents would view the death of a child as the most difficult event in their lives. Most people expect that they will live a long life, grow old, and die. The usual expectation for parents is that they will live to a ripe old age and die before their children. The real truth, that which corresponds to reality, is that death can occur at anytime.

We have already looked at how to glorify God in general difficulties and in death and dying (see lessons 15, 16, and 17). Today, we will focus in on the death of those who are incapable of making a decision about Jesus Christ. This study will apply to babies in the womb, infants, young children, or those with extremely diminished mental capacities.

These are very difficult situations for parents. Often there are other issues as well, for example a miscarriage late in the pregnancy can mean that the mother must go through the birthing process knowing that her baby will be stillborn. Also, bringing Biblical care to a parent regarding the death of a little one may mean that there is real guilt that must be addressed. This would be true for example in an instance when there was unwise decisions, neglect, or abortion. The goal of this study is to help bring peace and Biblical hope to those who have struggled through these issues.

Review

Lessons 15, 16, and 17 provide the basis for glorifying God in difficult times. Let's review a little.

God is faithful. He will always do what He has said and fulfill what He has promised. He is steadfast, unchanging, perfectly reliable, utterly dependable, and completely trustworthy. Because He is faithful, we can fully submit ourselves to His sovereignty. His faithfulness preserves us from worry, will stop our complaining, and drive us to trust His sovereign plan.

❖ **Do you know at the heart level that God is faithful and believe all His promises?**

God is sovereign. He is the supreme ruler. All things are under His rule and control. He works all things after the counsel of His own will. Nothing happens without His direction or permission. His purpose is all-inclusive and is never thwarted; nothing takes Him by surprise. God's sovereignty deepens our reverence for Him, puts God and ourselves in the rightful place, magnifies God's grace, is profoundly humbling, gives us a sense of complete security, and provides comfort in sorrow.

❖ **How does understanding God's sovereignty change your view of suffering?**

All believers will experience life's difficulties. The purposes of difficulty is to test the strength of our faith, humble us, teach us to trust God and not in ourselves, remind us of our future glory, develop godly character and strength, enable us to better help others in their trials, allow us to receive help in time of need, cause us to learn more of God's Word, and give us opportunities for service. God has given His children everything they need to glorify Him through the suffering. God is sovereign and in His sovereignty **He works ALL things for His glory and our good** (Rom 8:28).

❖ **Are you able to consider all difficulty as joy?**

Dogmatic?

For the believer facing death, there is much hope. Reviewing the Bible's description of heaven can be encouraging and hope inspiring. The Scriptures portray a wonderful, blessed view of heaven. The believer's citizenship is in heaven (Phil 3:20) which is where we long to be (2 Cor 5:8). This sure, steadfast hope set before believers is anchor for our soul.

¹³But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that **you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope.** 1 Thess 4:13

¹⁸so that by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, **we who have taken refuge would have strong encouragement to take hold of the hope set before us.**

¹⁹**This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, a hope both sure and steadfast and one which enters within the veil,** Heb 6:18-19

❖ **How have you grieved a loss?**

But what of those who because of age or capacity are not capable of understanding? Some might say, "Of course, God would save the 'innocent'." The problem with that statement is that no one, from baby in the womb to Methuselah (who lived to be 960 years old), is truly "innocent". We are all sinners.

We must understand what the Scriptures teach on this if we are to have true hope. Unfortunately, the Bible does not give an explicit answer to the question of what happens to those with diminished capacity when they die, so we cannot be dogmatic. However, in areas that are not explicitly taught, we can have high confidence based on the weight of Scriptural evidence. We then trust God knowing His character.

We must first affirm:

1. All people, even children, are sinners.

⁵Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, And in sin my mother conceived me. Psa 51:5

²³for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, Rom 3:23

³Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were **by nature children of wrath**, even as the rest. Eph 2:3

2. Salvation is sovereignly all of God through Jesus Christ by the gifts of grace and saving faith.

¹⁶"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. John 3:16

²³For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. Rom 6:23

⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God; ⁹not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. Eph 2:8-9

Fate of those with Diminished Capacity

Many OT and NT passages seem to indicate that God deals with those with diminished capacity in a different way than He deals with those able to understand. Many people believe in an "age of accountability". This really is not a Biblical concept. However, there does appear to be instead a "state of accountability". A key passage is found in Romans.

¹⁸For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, ¹⁹because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. ²⁰**For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.** ²¹**For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks,** but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. ²²Professing to be wise, they became fools, ²³and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures. Rom 1:18-23

Paul's argument in this passage is: people are without excuse and are under God's wrath because they can see and understand that God is evident in creation and they reject that truth. At some point people suppress the truth and intentionally reject God. The key is the word "understood". An unborn child cannot "understand". An infant or young child cannot "understand". Those with congenital severely reduced mental capacity cannot understand. Each of these groups have a sin nature, but are "with excuse".

The wages of sin is death (physical and spiritual) (Rom 6:23). Yet there are two groups of people that die. There are those that die because they have a sin nature (those with diminished capacity) and there are those that die because they have a sin nature and love sin (older children and adults). As we will see, God appears to deal with those that cannot understand differently than with those that have the capacity to understand.

Let's look at some OT and NT passages that speak to the issue of the fate of those that are unable to understand. Remember, there is no explicit teaching on this subject. There are no proof texts. We are looking at the weight of Biblical evidence to give us high confidence that we understand what God thinks. Much of what follows began by reading Jesse Johnson's article on thecripplegate.com.

1. Ezekiel 16:21 – God chastised unbelieving Israel for their apostasy. He describes children who are sacrificed to idols as "My children" indicating a special relationship with the children of these unbelieving families.

²⁰"Moreover, you took your sons and daughters whom you had borne to Me and sacrificed them to idols to be devoured. Were your harlotries so small a matter? ²¹You slaughtered **My children** and offered them up to idols by causing them to pass through *the fire*.
Ezek 16:20-21

2. Deuteronomy 1:39 – Moses, recounting what the Lord had told him regarding not being able to enter the promised land, quotes God as making a distinction between adults and children. Children have a sin nature, but they have no "knowledge of good and evil".

³⁸Joshua the son of Nun, who stands before you, he shall enter there; encourage him, for he will cause Israel to inherit it. ³⁹Moreover, your little ones who you said would become a prey, and your sons, who this day **have no knowledge of good or evil**, shall enter there, and I will give it to them and they shall possess it. ⁴⁰But as for you, turn around and set out for the wilderness by the way to the Red Sea.' Deut 1:38-40

3. Jonah 4:11 – Many commentators view the idiomatic expression "do not know the difference between their right and left hand" referring to those who could not discern right from wrong. God pointed out this group to Jonah as especially deserving mercy.

¹¹Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who **do not know the difference between their right and left hand**, as well as many animals?" Jonah 4:11

4. Jeremiah 19:4 – God plans to bring calamity on Judah. One reason given is that they sacrificed their children to Baal. God calls the children “innocent”.

⁴Because they have forsaken Me and have made this an alien place and have burned sacrifices in it to other gods, that neither they nor their forefathers nor the kings of Judah had ever known, and because **they have filled this place with the blood of the innocent** ⁵and have built the high places of Baal to burn their sons in the fire as burnt offerings to Baal, a thing which I never commanded or spoke of, nor did it ever enter My mind; Jer 19:4-5

5. Isaiah 7:10-16 – God, through Isaiah, speaks of a time when children understand the difference between good and evil. Children are sinners by nature, but have no understanding of God through creation nor understand the difference between good and evil. It appears that God views the sins of those with diminished capacity as coming from a form of innocence rather than chosen rebellion.

¹⁰Then the Lord spoke again to Ahaz, saying, ¹¹“Ask a sign for yourself from the Lord your God; make *it* deep as Sheol or high as heaven.” ¹²But Ahaz said, “I will not ask, nor will I test the Lord!” ¹³Then he said, “Listen now, O house of David! Is it too slight a thing for you to try the patience of men, that you will try the patience of my God as well? ¹⁴Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel. ¹⁵**He will eat curds and honey at the time He knows enough to refuse evil and choose good.** ¹⁶**For before the boy will know enough to refuse evil and choose good,** the land whose two kings you dread will be forsaken. Isa 7:10-16

6. 1 Kings 14:13 – Israel’s king Jeroboam succeeded from Judah with the northern 10 tribes. He set up idols to worship and did evil in the sight of God. God, through the prophet Ahijah pronounced judgment on Jeroboam’s male offspring. All of the male offspring would be killed and not undergo burial, but instead be eaten by dogs or birds. His infant son would die, but would be buried with mourning because in him something “good” was found toward the Lord God of Israel.

¹¹Anyone belonging to Jeroboam who dies in the city the dogs will eat. And he who dies in the field the birds of the heavens will eat; for the Lord has spoken *it*.” ¹²Now you, arise, go to your house. When your feet enter the city the child will die. ¹³**All Israel shall mourn for him and bury him, for he alone of Jeroboam’s family will come to the grave, because in him something good was found toward the Lord God of Israel** in the house of Jeroboam. 1 Kings 14:11-13

7. Job 3:11-19 – Job was bemoaning his life and wished that he had never been born. He then says that it would have been better to have been stillborn or miscarried since he would have been in heaven.

¹¹“Why did I not die at birth, Come forth from the womb and expire? ¹²“Why did the knees receive me, And why the breasts, that I should suck? ¹³“For now I would have lain down and been quiet; I would have slept then, I would have been at rest, ¹⁴With kings and *with* counselors of the earth, Who rebuilt ruins for themselves; ¹⁵Or with princes who had gold, Who were filling their houses *with* silver. ¹⁶“Or like a miscarriage which is discarded, I would not be, As infants that never saw light. ¹⁷“There the wicked cease from raging, And there the weary are at rest. ¹⁸“The prisoners are at ease together; They do not hear the voice of the taskmaster. ¹⁹“The small and the great are there, And the slave is free from his master. Job 3:11-19

8. Ecclesiastes 6:1-6 – This passage is difficult to understand, but one understanding is that Solomon is contrasting the fate of the wicked who labor in vain with that of the dead infant. Verse 5’s “it is better off than he” is literally “more rest has this one than that one”. Both die, but the infant finds rest; the wicked do not.

¹There is an evil which I have seen under the sun and it is prevalent among men— ²a man to whom God has given riches and wealth and honor so that his soul lacks nothing of all that he desires; yet God has not empowered him to eat from them, for a foreigner enjoys them. This is vanity and a severe affliction. ³If a man fathers a hundred *children* and lives many years, however many they be, but his soul is not satisfied with good things and he does not even have a *proper* burial, *then* I say, “Better the miscarriage than he, ⁴for it comes in futility and goes into obscurity; and its name is covered in obscurity. ⁵It never sees the sun and it never knows *anything*; it is better off than he. ⁶Even if the *other* man lives a thousand years twice and does not enjoy good things—do not all go to one place?” Ecc 6:1-6

9. 2 Samuel 12:13-23 – David’s infant son born to the widow of Uriah was sick and dying. David fasted and prayed fervently thinking, “who knows, the Lord may be gracious to me, that the child may live.” When the baby died, David did not grieve excessively, but arose and worshipped the Lord. His servants were shocked at this. David’s response is one of peace that his child is with the Lord, where David would one day join him.

²¹Then his servants said to him, “What is this thing that you have done? While the child was alive, you fasted and wept; but when the child died, you arose and ate food.”²²He said, “While the child was *still* alive, I fasted and wept; for I said, ‘Who knows, the Lord may be gracious to me, that the child may live.’ ²³But now he has died; why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I will go to him, but he will not return to me.” 2 Sam 12:21-23

Compare David’s response regarding the child with that when he was told that his son Absalom had died. Absalom was an unbeliever, in rebellion to Yahweh and His anointed king. David is distraught that Absalom will spend eternity apart from the Lord.

³³The king was deeply moved and went up to the chamber over the gate and wept. And thus he said as he walked, “O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!” 2 Sam 18:33

10. Matthew 18:1-5 – Jesus’ analogy here only makes sense if children are indeed bound for heaven if they die.

¹At that time the disciples came to Jesus and said, “Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” ²And He called a child to Himself and set him before them, ³and said, “Truly I say to you, **unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.** ⁴Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. ⁵And whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me; ⁶but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a heavy millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea. Matt 18:1-6

11. Revelation 5:9 – Since the gospel has not been preached to every tribe, tongue, people, and nation and there are those who are saved from every one and some tribe, tongue, people, and nations no longer exist, then ones Jesus purchased from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation are ones with diminished capacity to whom God has shown grace.

⁹And they sang a new song, saying, “Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for **You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.** ¹⁰“You have made them *to be* a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth.” Rev 5:9-10

12. Revelation 21:8 – Judgment passages and passages that describe hell make it clear that people are in hell for their deeds, their acts of sin. Something those with diminished capacity are incapable of.

⁸But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part *will be* in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.” Rev 21:8

The weight of Biblical evidence indicates that those with diminished capacity receive mercy. God does not save them because they are “innocent” since they have a sin nature. He saves them in mercy and grace given to those that are sinful, yet lack the capacity to understand the truth revealed about Him either in nature or in the gospel.

Biblical Care

Miscarriage (and Loss of an Infant/Child)

Today, we are not going to spend time on an apologetic for when life begins. You can see valleybible.net/PositionPapers/Abortion.pdf for more information on when life begins. We believe that life begins at conception. Therefore, when a woman miscarries, a baby has died.

Twenty five percent of early stage pregnancies (less than 50 days) end in miscarriage. After those early weeks, there is a 5% chance that the pregnancy will end in miscarriage. If a woman has experienced a miscarriage, the probability goes up that she will experience another. So, chances are you or someone you know has been touched by miscarriage.

Along with the grief over the loss there can also be physical ramifications of the miscarriage. In some cases the woman’s body does not naturally pass the baby. In these cases, the mother may have to undergo medical procedures to remove the baby and in some cases have labor induced to give birth to the stillborn baby. Hormone changes have also begun for the pregnancy and take time to return to the non-pregnant levels. All of this means that a woman (or couple) who have experienced a miscarriage are in need love and care.

In caring for those who have experienced the loss of a child, we should avoid clichés and platitudes for the dear woman or couple who are hurting from the loss of their baby. Avoid insensitive comments like: “Well, you know this is very common,” or “At least you were very early in your pregnancy,” or “You can always try again,” or “God loved your baby so much that He wanted the baby with Him in heaven,” or “Well, at least you have your other child(ren),” or “I know how you feel,” or “God planned it this way.” Be content simply to “mourn with those who mourn”.

¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep (*mourn in NIV*) with those who weep.
Rom 12:15

Unless you have a relationship with the woman or couple, avoid saying, “I’ll pray for you.” unless you really mean it. It may be best to say, “I’ll pray for you and would you mind if we prayed together now?”

For those who have experienced the heart wrenching loss of a child:

1. Understand that the ability to glorify God in this midst of this loss only comes through a relationship with your Creator through Jesus Christ.
2. Understand that you must walk in the Spirit. You must bow only to the Lord as master and not to your grief.

3. Acknowledge the loss and allow yourself to grieve. Husband, allow your wife to see you grieve as well. Remember though that a believer does not grieve as those who do not have hope – the child is in the presence of Jesus.

¹³But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that **you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope.** 1 Thess 4:13

4. Meditate on passages that describe God's character and attributes.
5. Focus on God's goodness and care for you.

⁷I will rejoice and be glad in your steadfast love, because you have seen my affliction; you have known the distress of my soul, Psa 31:7 (ESV)

⁸**You are good and do good;** Teach me Your statutes. Psa 119:68

Do not start from the loss of your baby and work to the goodness of God. Start from the goodness of God and work toward your loss. Understand your loss in the context of God's unwavering goodness.

The Lord was good, and did good, in giving His baby to you. The Lord was good, and did good, in taking His baby from you.

¹The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

²He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside quiet waters.

³He restores my soul; He guides me in the paths of righteousness For His name's sake.

⁴Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.

⁵You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You have anointed my head with oil; My cup overflows.

⁶Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life, And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Psa 23

6. Focus on your marriage. Marriages can unravel when there is the loss of a child (the best statistic for this shows ~16% of marriages end in divorce after the death of a child). Pray, meditate on God's Word, talk, fulfill your marriage roles, and seek the fellowship of mature brothers and sisters.
7. Review God's purposes for difficult times (lessons 15, 16, and 17). Acknowledge that this time is for His glory and your good, even though you do not understand how.
8. Continue to use your gifts to serve others in the body (1 Pet 4:10). This takes the focus off your loss and onto others, seeing others as more important than yourself (Phil 2:3-4).

³Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; ⁴do not *merely* look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. Phil 2:3-4

Abortion

For those women or couples who have killed their baby through abortion, we must understand that this is not the unpardonable sin. God can and does forgive. When there is true repentance, there can be true forgiveness and restoration with their Creator. The first step is accepting this forgiveness for the sin which releases the woman (or couple) from the guilt. The sin has been paid for by Jesus and they do not need to keep "paying for it" through false guilt.

After the beginning or restoring a relationship with God the Father through Jesus Christ, the above steps may be helpful.

Concluding Thoughts

The weight of Biblical evidence indicates that those with diminished capacity (unborn, infant, small child, or significantly diminished mental capacity) receive mercy and enter into the presence of God upon death. This provides great comfort to those who have suffered the loss. In the midst of such loss, God is there and provides everything his child needs to honor Him and live abundantly.

Real Life Scenarios

Yourself #1: You and your husband are very excited about being parents. You decided to start your family and within a few months found out you were pregnant. You immediately told everyone – your parents, siblings, workmates, church friends, etc. At your regular doctor appointment this week, you found out that you miscarried. What should be your focus and how would you most honor God in this most difficult situation?

Yourself #2: It has been many months since your six week old baby suddenly died in his sleep. You find yourself sad all the time, longing to hold your baby and becoming increasingly bitter. You and your husband are private people and are trying to get through this time on your own, but life continues a downward spiral. After looking at our study today, what are some things that you could focus on? What changes would honor God in this most difficult situation?

Someone Else #1: Walking up to church in the parking lot you greet your friend (who you know is a believer). Several weeks ago she announced was pregnant with their first. You ask a natural question about how the pregnancy is going and she bursts into tears telling you that they lost the baby. What do you say? What do you not say? What do you do? What do you not do? Later that week you invite her over for lunch. What might you share with your friend?

Someone Else #2: Once a month you have lunch with a group of friends, people you currently work with and some who have left your department. This month you show up, but only one other person attends due to work commitments and the holidays. You know this person, but aren't very close. You do know that about 8 months ago their 2.5 year old drowned in their pool. The normal small-talk ensues and slowly moves into a little more personal info. He/She eventually shares the struggles of overcoming the loss of their child. In thinking about bringing Biblical care to your hurting friend, what is the first thing you need to know? What is the next thing you might share with him/her?

Biblical Solutions for Life Issues

Topic 36 – Parenting: Loss of a Child – Additional Study

Reread the study on the fate of those with diminished capacity. Read these verses on heaven: 1 Cor 13:12; Psa 16:11; Rev 21:3; Rev 7:14-17; Heb 12:22-24; Rev 21:4.

Write down the different ways these truths give you peace.

For 150 days read one Psalm each day starting with Psalm 1 (or for example read two Psalms a day for 75 days, three for 50 days, 4 for 38 days, 5 for 30 days).

Take a notebook and note the following for each Psalm:

What does the psalmist say about God's character?

What does the psalmist say about God's care for his children?

Read Jeremiah 17:5-8

Describe the person who trusts in other things than God (v5-6):

Describe the person who trusts in God (v7-8):

Read 2 Peter 1:3 and explain what God's faithfulness means to believers who are committed to be doers of the His Word.

Read Psalm 20:6-8

⁶Now I know that the Lord saves his anointed; he will answer him from his holy heaven with the saving might of his right hand. ⁷Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God. ⁸They collapse and fall, but we rise and stand upright. Psa 20:6-8 (ESV)

Make a list of things other than God that you are tempted to trust in when going through hard times. If you have trusted in them, pray, repenting of each and commit to the Lord to trust only in Him.