

---

## 19: Guilty Grief

A baby is a baby. That's why a loss before birth, although it may not be as devastating as a loss during or after birth, is still a loss and may be grieved. This doesn't mean, however, that a loss at any stage must be grieved. Some mothers may well be able to accept a miscarriage and go on with life without either resorting to denial or succumbing to grief. Some miscarriages are far less traumatic than others. Parents shouldn't necessarily feel guilty for a lack of grief. Every situation is different, and every person handles loss differently.

On the other hand, some mothers may be overwhelmed with grief that is compounded by guilt. Perhaps they had difficulty accepting an unexpected pregnancy that was subsequently lost. Perhaps they blame themselves by thinking that some activity during pregnancy led to the death of their child. Perhaps they are tormented by past sins and can't help thinking that the child's death was their just punishment.

Ironically, reading certain Scripture passages may actually compound this guilt. A mother feeling guilty over her initial difficulty in accepting a pregnancy may feel increased guilt when reading passages that speak of children as a heritage from the LORD. A mother feeling that she failed in her trust to carry a pregnancy full term may feel additional guilt when reading passages emphasizing childbearing as a means to advance God's kingdom. And a mother regretting past sin may be further burdened with guilt when reading passages that appear to contrast the blessing of life for obedience with the curse of death for disobedience. A closer look is in order.

Scripture clearly teaches that children are a blessing from the Lord. The Psalms, which are a precious source of comfort in a time of loss, also speak powerfully about the blessing of children. Psalm 113 speaks of how God "gives the barren woman a home, making

her the joyous mother of children” (v. 9). Psalm 127:3–5 depicts the blessing of children: “Children are a heritage from the LORD,” and “the fruit of the womb a reward.” Children are compared to “arrows in the hand of a warrior;” the man is “blessed” whose “quiver” is full. These archery images are quickly followed by the agricultural images of Psalm 128, where a wife is compared to “a fruitful vine” and children to “olive shoots” around the family table (vv. 3–6). Grieving parents may feel weighed down by guilt when reading such passages. They need to be reminded that—even if they initially failed to appreciate the anticipated child—God decreed the number of this child’s days before conception.

In Psalm 139, which speaks so beautifully of God knitting together the unborn child, David writes: “All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be” (v. 16, NIV84). Before the mother’s reaction to her pregnancy, before she even began to suspect she was pregnant, God had already determined when that child would be called home. God sovereignly ordains the life and the death of each person. Psalm 37:18 tells us that the “LORD knows the days of the blameless.” Before any child was conceived, God knew the exact number of that child’s days. No matter when God takes a child from this life, whether early or late in a pregnancy, before or after birth, the number of that child’s days has been ordained by God.

The perception about the responsibility to bear children in obedience to God and to further His kingdom has validity since this is a foundational concept from the beginning of Scripture. God’s command to Adam and Eve was to “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen. 1:28). Old Testament mothers longed for children as a sign of God’s blessing and to bring the chosen line closer to the coming Messiah. Bearing children was important to the patriarchs’ wives—so important that Rachel demanded Jacob “give her children” or she would die. He rightly asked, “Am I in the place of God who has kept you from having children?” (Gen. 30:1–2, NIV84). Jacob acknowledged God’s sovereignty in bestowing or withholding the blessing of birth.

The longing for the Messiah was fulfilled in Christ, who embraced children and said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these”

(Matt. 19:14, Mark 10:14, Luke 18:16, NIV84). Even though Christ has come as the promised Messiah who blesses little children, the concept of having children as a covenantal responsibility remains. Christian parents still believe that the birth of every covenant child adds to God's kingdom. Parents who feel as if they've somehow failed in their covenantal responsibilities must realize that their child—no matter when he or she was taken from them—is still part of God's kingdom. They need to remember God's sovereignty in this bitter providence.

A deeply embedded Old Testament paradigm is that of blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience. Before Moses hands the reins of leadership to Joshua, he admonishes the people at length, including the injunction: "Now choose life, so that you and your children may live" (Deut. 30:19, NIV84). Many other passages in Deuteronomy promise long life and blessing for believers and their children who obey God's commands (6:2, 11:21, 7:12–14, 12:28). In the Ten Commandments and other readings of the law, however, children are to be punished for the sins of the fathers to the third and fourth generation (Exodus 20:5; 34:7; Num. 14:18; Deut. 5:9).

Blessing and curse were directly linked with childbearing in the stories of Hannah and Michal. Hannah was blessed with children for her faithfulness (1 Sam. 1), while Michal was cursed with barrenness for her unfaithfulness (2 Sam. 6:23). Adultery is linked to barrenness in Numbers 5:28, which states that only the woman free from adultery will be able to bear children. David's double sins of adultery and murder were punished by the death of the child Bathsheba bore (2 Sam. 12). cursory readings of such passages could make a parent feel as if the loss of a child is punishment for personal sin. Except for Christ, everyone who has ever lived on earth is a sinner (Ps. 14:1–3; 53:1–13; Rom. 3:10–12). And we live in a sinful world. Every person is a sinner, but not every tragedy is punishment for sin.

Job is the ultimate example of a righteous man whose suffering was not a punishment. Although his "comforters" were right about the inherent sinfulness of man and the sovereign righteousness of God, they erred when they accused Job of secret sin. Job was not being punished for his sin. His suffering stands through the ages as a powerful testimony of God's sovereignty and love in the midst of tragedy.

The biblical emphasis on the blessing of children, the covenantal responsibility to bear children, and the doctrine of punishment for sin may sharpen the grief believing parents feel after the loss of an infant. But it's important to remember that the loss of a child is a result of sin, not a punishment for sin. Our world is weighed down with the effects of sin, but tragedies are not usually direct punishment for personal sin.

It's also important to remember that there is forgiveness for every sordid sin that lurks in the shadowy past. After confession and repentance, the Christian must cling to God's promised forgiveness. Psalm 103:12 assures us that "as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us." God removes our sin far from us for the sake of Christ. He paid the penalty for all our sins and substituted His perfect life for each of our sin-ridden lives. Believers should live with an awareness of sin and daily repent from specific sins, but believing parents shouldn't allow a false sense of guilt to compound what may be an already overwhelming sense of grief after the loss of an infant.