



A Quick Reference and Lesson Guide

Death of a Child

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1 Scenarios and Assessment

Scenarios/Case Studies

A. Scenario #1

Sarah and Michael lost their eighteen-year-old son due to an auto accident two years ago. They are constantly fighting over how to grieve. Sarah wants to clean out the child's room to get away from the memories. Michael wants to keep the room intact as a memorial.

B. Scenario #2

Hannah and Jeremy are an older couple grieving the death of their thirty-three-year-old daughter from breast cancer five years ago. Hannah is still angry at God. Jeremy has accepted the death. Hannah is angry at Jeremy for not grieving the loss the way she thinks he should.

C. Scenario #3

Brittany and David are a young couple grieving a miscarriage in the second trimester. They have planned their lives and prepared their home for the arrival of their baby. There were no signs of complications. Now the two are experiencing different stages of grief concurrently. Brittany is depressed and David is angry. This has caused some tension in the relationship because the two are grieving “out of sync.”

Definitions and Key Thoughts

A. Facts and Statistics

1. Seventy percent of all childhood deaths are caused by an illness that a parent could do nothing to prevent.
2. Nearly nine million children under the age of five die every year, according to 2007 data.
3. Leading causes of death in children under five are pneumonia, diarrhea, and health problems during the first month of life.
4. Of school-aged children five to eleven, 84.8 percent are in excellent or very good health.
5. Some 3.2 percent of school-aged children five to eleven missed eleven or more days of school in the past twelve months because of illness or injury.

B. Death brings grief.

1. Grief is a response to loss and can affect the person emotionally, physically, and socially.
2. Grief can also cause a crisis of faith.
3. Parents may wonder: (1) Why didn't God protect our child? (2) We have been faithful to the work of God; why did this happen? (3) Is it possible we weren't faithful enough?

4. Some parents blame themselves for the loss of the child or one parent may blame the other. If this continues it can damage their relationship.
5. Each parent should be given the space to determine how they will grieve and what, if anything, they will do to memorialize their child.
6. It is also important to consider how siblings are dealing with grief. Even though the couple might be the only ones in the office, if there are other children in the house, their grieving should be considered and acknowledged. It is important for the couple to understand how their other child (or children) is grieving.

Assessment (Interview)

- A. Here are some questions for situations involving the recent death of a child:
 1. How are each of you doing?
 2. How is your relationship?
 3. How is your relationship with God?
 4. Did you know your spouse was feeling this way?
 5. How has your view of the future changed?
 6. How are your other children responding to the death of their sibling?
 7. How are other family members and friends responding to the loss?
- B. Here are some questions for situations involving a less recent death of a child:
 1. How has your day-to-day living changed?
 2. What does your grieving look like?
 3. What kinds of feelings are you experiencing?
- C. Here are some red flags to watch for:
 1. Suicidal or homicidal language or behavior from either parent.
 2. One or both parent missing church services or church events more than usual.
 3. Parents are beginning to blame each other or themselves for death of child.

2

Critique and Counsel

Biblical Insight

- A. *“But Jesus said, ‘Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven’” (Matthew 19:14, KJV).* Children are important to God. Jesus used little children to illustrate to His disciples how He expects us to approach God. God cherishes us as we cherish our own children, and He grieves the loss of any of His children.
- B. From the earliest stories in Genesis, the loss of a child, or possible loss of a child, plays an intricate role in the movement of the narrative.
 1. Adam and Eve lost Cain, (Gen 4:1-15).
 2. Abraham was asked to sacrifice Isaac (Gen 22:1-19).
 3. Jacob thought that Joseph had perished (Gen 37:34).

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4. The sons of the Hebrews were killed by Pharaoh (Exodus 1:22).
 5. King Herod killed the young sons of the women of Judah in a vain attempt to prevent the loss of his throne to the promised Messiah (Matthew 2:16).
 6. God used both Elijah and Elisha to heal young boys after their parents found them dead (I Kings 17, II Kings 4).
 7. David was forced to endure the death of his child due to his sins (II Samuel 12:18).
 8. During His ministry, Jesus healed Jarius's daughter (Luke 8:49-56).
- C. It seems unnatural for parents to outlive their children. It was a source of great suffering to be barren or to lose a child in the Bible. For the Jews, children were the promise of salvation. They received a promise from God that their lineage would endure and that God had blessed their family.
- D. Jesus promised comfort for those who mourn (Matthew 5:6). The body of Christ is called to provide comfort to the grief-stricken, especially those who have outlived their children.
- E. It can also be helpful to ask the couple what passages of Scripture they have found comforting during this time of grief.

Wise Counsel

A. Grieving the Loss of a Child

1. The death of a child will permanently alter the lives of the parents and the family, both immediate and extended. The death of a young child can alter the lives of many in the church as well.
2. The process of grieving a child's death will be different for every person affected. The parents will feel isolated as others around them might not know how to help the family in the days and weeks following the loss of a child. Friends and family might be at a loss for words themselves and be unable to support the parents.
3. It is important for ministry leadership to remain available and supportive to the changing needs of a grieving parent. The death of a child will bring a crisis of faith no matter the age of the child. This should be viewed as an acceptable stage of grieving.
4. The death of a believer's child should not be expected to be easier than the death of a non-believer's child. If appropriate and if the parent(s) is receptive; encourage a continued faith in God and a daily relationship with Him through Bible reading and prayer. Avoid scripted sayings such as "time heals all" or "God knows best."
5. Parents need room and support to grieve as they are able. And they need ministerial leadership to help them understand that they are still loved, supported, and accepted by the church. Remain present in their life as they develop a new sense of "normal."

B. Encouragement for Couples

1. The loss of a child can be emotionally devastating for couples, but the idea that bereaved couples are doomed to divorce is a myth. Most marriages are strong enough to overcome the death of a child.
2. Stay hopeful in the peace and comfort God provides.
3. Remind the couple that Christ is present in their situation and that there is hope for the future (Matthew 5:4).

C. Normalizing Grief: Five Stages of Grief (based on the theory of Kubler-Ross). There are other theories of grief but this is the most common and recognizable.

1. The five stages of grief are denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.
2. The pastor should try to identify where each parent is on this scale. Sometimes couples grieve "out of sync"; meaning, one may be feeling guilty while the other is angry. Understanding how each spouse is grieving can provide wisdom to the pastor on how to help the couple cope as a team.
3. Each spouse should be given the space to grieve differently. The couple should be encouraged to talk about their child and to express the emotions that they feel surrounding the death.
4. The grieving process does not have a 'normal' time frame. The parents can only move forward when they are ready.
5. Be patient with the couple and encourage each spouse to be patient with the other. If there is an emotional rift between the parents, help each spouse to listen to the other and to repeat back to the spouse what was heard. The important thing is to keep communication open.

3

Application and Prayer

Application

- A. The following practical steps can be taken by the couple after the meeting. These suggestions are not exhaustive, and pastors are encouraged to customize these tools according to their relationship with and understanding of each couple. The most important thing is for the couple to focus on their relationship.
 1. Sometimes the couple can gain a new perspective by going away somewhere together.
 2. Talking together about the child or reviewing family albums together can help reform the bond of relationship in the wake of a child's death.
 3. Reviewing their day each evening can help the couple to take stock of how each spouse is coping with their grief.
 4. Each spouse should be encouraged to be patient with each other as they grieve.
 5. Each spouse should be encouraged to try to please the other spouse with an activity that he/she enjoys.
 6. The couple should be encouraged to join a support group.
 7. The couple can honor the memory of their child by planting a garden in their backyard or volunteering for local community service.
- B. A referral to individual counseling can also be helpful if one of both are "stuck" in different places of grief.
- C. Eventually the couple should integrate the loss into their relationship and find a place of acceptance. The deceased child will always be a part of the family. The couple should come

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to a shared emotional peace concerning the loss and be willing to move on to the future the Lord has planned for them (Jeremiah 29:11).

Prayer

“Jesus, I know the loss of (insert child’s name) has caused (names of both partners) to feel (insert feelings and emotions you heard from the couple). Lord, these are real and authentic feelings that are difficult to live with. I pray that as (couple) work toward repairing the bonds of marriage that You have originally instituted, that You would send Your peace and mercy to them in a mighty and real way. Let the unction of Your Holy Spirit compel them toward the goal of acceptance and restoration of their relationship. We thank You for the peace You have already given. I pray that we, as a church family, may support (couple) during this time of grief. Just as You love each of us as Your children, I pray we may love each other through this agonizing time. Thank You for being with us during this meeting and thank You for keeping us in grace and mercy. In Jesus’ name, Amen.”

4 Recommended Resources

- Cook, J. A & Wimberly, D. W. (1983). If I should die before I wake: Religious commitment and adjustment to the death of a child. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 22 no 3, 222-238.
- Davenport, B. (1995). *The worst loss: how families heal from the death of a child*. New York, NY: H. Holt.
- Ford, K. (Writer), & D'Arcy, P. (Screenwriter). (2011). *Helping Parents Grieve* [Motion picture on DVD]. US: Paraclete Press.
- Rosenblatt, P. C. (2000). *Help your marriage survive the death of a child*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Stillwell, E. (2004). *The death of a child: reflections for grieving parents*. Chicago, IL: ACTA Publications.
- Talbot, K. (2016). *What forever means after the death of a child: transcending the trauma, living with the loss*. New York, NY: Routledge.

***Search online for support groups specific to the loss of a child in your area and arrange to speak with the organizational leadership to ensure the group will be a positive idea for the parents. Many support groups are sponsored through hospitals, churches, and community organizations.

5 Taking it to the Church

“Dealing with the Death of a Child”

John 3:16 KJV

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

The words of John 3:16, probably more than any other Scripture verse, describe the immense amount of love that is displayed in the crucifixion of Christ. “For God so loved... that He gave His only begotten Son.” This is an unfathomable love that the finite minds of humans have never been able to completely grasp. There are no words that can express the pain and unending emptiness that is left within parents when they lose a child. The church has a responsibility to love and care for the hurting in every way possible. Although it is difficult to create a standardized comforting process, since every parent grieves differently, it remains the church’s responsibility to search for ways to appropriately care for and comfort such parents during one of the hardest and most painful struggles of their lives.

Why is there a need for a ministry targeting those who have lost a child and why must the church intervene on their behalf? Taking a moment to consider the feelings of emotional despair that such people are experiencing can, without a doubt, aid in the church’s search for the answers to the questions, Why it must respond?; What it must respond to?; and How it should respond? It is important to recognize that when these parents have lost a child they have also lost a part of themselves. Their dreams, plans for the future, and self-identity are all wrapped up in the existence of their child(ren). When such a loss occurs, these parents no longer know who they are or what they must do to return to normality. In addition to the loss of personal identity, the married couple loses their conjoined identity. While matrimony joins two people together, the death of a child returns them once more to being two separate individuals. When these two people need to be together the most and need each other the most, they are torn apart by grieving in different ways. This is when the church must join together as a family to comfort them.

Isaiah 40:1 KJV

“Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God.”

James 1:27 KJV

“Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.”

While James does not specifically include bereaved parents in his list of those to be cared for by the church, it is obvious that his reference is to comfort those who are in distress. Since both orphans and widows are descriptions of people who have lost someone dear to their self-identity and survival, it seems reasonable to also include bereaved parents in this list. This distress can cause a tear in the family unit. If the church does not step in to repair that tear, it could permanently damage the family. Returning unity, peace, and sense to such a family is as much a part of the mission of the church as helping the widows and orphans.

Before we continue and look at how the church can help couples experiencing this crisis, let us take a look at some things that are not always helpful. It is important to allow space for the couple to grieve; there is even a time and place to encourage grieving. One of the worst things that a community can do to a person during their loss is to prohibit them from grieving. American culture has proven to be detrimental in this area, and often has contributed to misconceptions within the church. Early on, society teaches children it is not appropriate to cry or demonstrate other emotions in public. Often when children cry at school or on the playground they are taunted by other children and called “crybaby.” This taunt quickly teaches children the “evils” of crying. This lesson is nearly always transferred into adulthood and it is therefore important for the church to create the safe space for grief to be expressed. The ability to show emotion is one of humanity’s great gifts, yet society seems to place negative value on this gift.

American culture attempts to eliminate the opportunity for grief. Our culture says, “You must keep busy.” However, as they point out, all this does is prolong the pain, bottle up the grief, and never allow the person to come to terms with their situation. Instead, the bereaved lives year after year believing that if they can just hang on for a while longer, then something will happen to make them feel better. If the person is not allowed to grieve initially, then that grief will come out later, which will be much worse for the bereaved. One of the greatest disadvantages to delayed grief is that very little support will be offered after a time lapse. The church should never discourage grief. Christ declared in His Sermon on the Mount, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” Sufficient time should be allowed for every bereaved person to grieve for their lost one.

Another easy thing to remember is to think before speaking. During a time of grief, friends of the bereaved often want to help; however, they are unsure of what to say. The easy key to solving this problem is in thinking before speaking. If you are unsure of what to say, it is better to not say anything at all. Offering prayer or a hug can sometimes provide more help than a thousand words. One of the statements we often make when trying to console a grieving couple is, “If there’s anything I can do, let me know.” Of course, this sounds heartfelt and it usually is, but what this statement actually does is places the ball in the grieving person’s court, right where it does not belong. The hurting parent or couple is in a state of instability and would not call someone for help even if they needed it. Instead, members of the church need to be specific in their offer of assistance. One can usually figure out what the needs of the family are, and one should offer assistance in those areas rather than waiting for hurting people to come asking for help.

There are also things that we can do as a church family to support those who are grieving. The gift of presence is perhaps the most important element in helping people in grief, and it is where healing begins in the grief process. The church's responsibilities for parents in a time of bereavement include simply being there and letting those parents know people care about them. When the church can do or say nothing else, it can always stand by and strengthen the hurting with their presence and support. It is also important to make contact as soon as possible. Human contact in the early hours of grief is an important factor. The church should make its primary effort to bind together in unison and show up to support the family during these initial stages of grief. Attendance and support at the wake, funeral, and graveside are all of extreme importance for the family. That being said, it is also important to allow the bereaved time to be alone. Sensitivity to the different stages of grief is essential. As stated earlier, it is of utmost importance that the parents are allowed to grieve. Constant human contact and busy activities can prevent them from this opportunity.

Another thing we can do as a church is provide a support group. Many times people are uncomfortable talking about the dead, so they feel that changing the subject will make it better for the grieving. However, this assumption usually proves to be incorrect. The church is not only a place in which to thank and praise, but also to share sorrow. The people within such a support group do not necessarily have to be other parents of deceased children. The only qualification should be that they have experienced some sort of grief. The purpose of such a support system is not to have people who can say "I have experienced exactly what you are going through." Rather, it is to allow people the opportunity to open up about their pain and their beautiful memories which they cherish so much. Furthermore, these people hold the grieving accountable and support them with their presence, daily encouragement, and continued prayers. Another way of demonstrating love and comfort to those grieving is through the written word. Some people may not feel strong in their verbal communicative abilities. If this is the case, they should attempt to relay their words of strength through pen and paper. Written letters on a routine basis in the immediate months following the death are powerful methods of strength and support for the grieving.

A final support that the church can provide for the grieving is aid for them around the house. Cleaning, mowing the lawn, providing food, etc., could benefit hurting parents. The church must remember that such tasks must continue to happen around the house and that these parents, during their current state of grief, are not physically or emotionally able to perform such daily duties in the immediate weeks and months following the departure of their beloved child. Above all of these things, continued prayer is a must. The church must not cease to be fervent in its prayers for these hurting parents in the months or even years after the funeral. The church must remember that this is a long grieving process, and, as such, its prayers must be continued for long periods of time. Often simply letting the grieving know your prayers have not ceased is enough to give them renewed strength to carry on with their day.

The church will be most effective in comforting those who have lost a child if we bind together and work to uphold the second commandment, to love our neighbor as ourselves. Just like each of us would need and want love, comfort, and peace during a time of loss, we should provide that to others.