



Why Did My Child Have To Die?

Wrestling with God's Sovereignty and Love

After the Death of my Son

By Cory Wessman

Like most (all?) grieving parents, we are sure you have asked God for answers. You can not fathom how this could happen to you, to your child, and to your family. In the time since my son died, I have asked God many questions, including questions such as:

- Why us? Why do we have to bear this burden of grief? Why not someone else?
- Why now? If we had to lose our son in death, why couldn't you have given us a few more years with him?
- Why couldn't the doctors help our child? So many other children with seemingly far more serious medical problems are still living, and yet my child isn't. How could you let this happen?
- You created the entire expanse of the earth, the Milky Way, and the entire universe. You created such complex structures as the human cell and the human eye. And yet you decided that you could not save our son when he was choking on a pea?
- After the pea became lodged in his airway, why couldn't we revive him? Why didn't I realize what was going on, and try to shake the pea loose? Why was I so powerless to watch my son die?

Regardless of the circumstances surrounding your child's death, you probably have similar questions. These specific questions have, in turn, led to broader questions about God and his attributes. If there is a God, does God really care about me? Does God have the ability to shape circumstances? Why doesn't God intercede on a more regular basis to save us from an endless ocean of grief that accompanies events like the death of our child?

But God has not sent you a point-by-point response to your specific questions. He hasn't given me specific answers, either. As a result, as grieving parents we are required to live lives of unanswered questions. And these unanswered questions impact the way we feel about God. Ken Gire writes, "Unanswered questions can form an impasse in our relationship with God that is Himalayan in its expanse. Stopped there, we look to the highest mountain in that range, to the God we once knew—or thought we knew—and the God whose paternal arms we once felt wrapped so protectively around us now seems an Everest of indifference." *Ken Gire, The North Face of God (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2005), 14*. As a grieving parent, I can relate to this "Everest of indifference." Particularly in the immediate aftermath of my son's sudden death, God didn't feel near. God did not send a special message encouraging me in my grief or giving me the reasons why my son had to die. Like so many other grieving parents, I felt emotionally distant from God.

Our options for making sense of a world of unanswered questions and the accompanying emotional distance from God really boil down to just two: (i) we can find answers that best suit our emotional needs (what I'll call a "sentimental approach"), or (ii) we can turn to the Bible, in faith, to find answers (what I'll call a "Biblical approach").

Sentimental Approach to Suffering

First, we could look for those answers that "feel" the best to us in our grief. We might call this the "sentimental" approach to grieving because this approach elevates the emotional impact over its actual substance. Particularly now, in these days when God feels distant, this approach feels attractive. With this approach, can mold your answers around what's comfortable and consistent with your desired manner of living. You can decide to look for those answers that cause the least interruption with the manner in which you would like to live your life, and you wouldn't need to abide by any outside standard in making value judgments. You may decide that your child's death should impact your life in a certain way, or you could decide that your child's death should not impact your life at all. But the benefit to this approach is that it is your choice.

Biblical Approach to Suffering

Alternatively, we could trust in what the Bible teaches about suffering, generally, and what God might be purposing through our child's death. Under this approach, we would choose to believe that just because God feels absent in the midst of great suffering does not mean that God is actually

absent. Of the two approaches, the Biblical approach to grief is probably more difficult because, in accepting the promises found in scripture, we are often required to set aside our previous conceptions of life, death, suffering and significance.

If we accept, in faith, Biblical Promises About Suffering, we learn that God uses suffering to teach us about the significance that God desires to bring to our lives and the joy He wants us to find in Him. Many of us who have lost children in death have found that there is no other way to address unanswered questions from God. Only by going to the Bible for guidance can we find meaning in our child's death, significance in our child's short life, and hope for our future. Through the truths contained in it, the Bible provides a strength and hope necessary for perseverance through a lifetime of suffering through your grief.

Will you join us, fellow grieving parents, in humbly submitting our unanswered questions, our lives and our future to God? Even in these days of unanswered questions, even when God doesn't answer and when He feels so distant, we pray that you would cling in hope to God's promises.

Biblical Promises About Suffering

Our child's death is not proof that there is no God or that the Bible is not true. In fact, if we examine the Bible closely, we find that God actually promises suffering to those of us who follow God. From the beginning of His own ministry, Jesus warned that suffering will accompany all those who follow Him. He tells his followers to "take up their cross and follow Him." *Matthew 10:38*. The Apostle Paul writes to one of the early Christian churches, telling them that suffering is part of God's plan. He writes, "Don't be unsettled by these trials. You know quite well we were destined for them." *1 Thessalonians 3:2-3*. Similarly, Peter tells the early Christian church, "Those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful creator and continue to do good." *1 Peter 4:19*. Rather than promising a life of comfort and luxury, Peter tells us that suffering is a part of God's plan for our lives.

But the Bible does not claim that suffering is good in and of itself. Instead, the Bible makes the audacious claim that God uses this suffering to accomplish His pre-designed purposes and to change us for our own good. God does not let suffering run rampant in the hopes that good things will eventually arise out of our strength or our own created purposes. God allows suffering to occur because he is actively involved in bringing redemption through our sufferings. The Bible teaches that God sometimes chooses to use the worst human suffering imaginable in order to achieve his great purposes.

The greatest example in the Bible of what God can do through great suffering, even death, is found in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Based upon the descriptions of Jesus in the Bible, Jesus deserved human acclaim. He healed the sick, taught about love, and challenged hypocritical religious leaders. Given that He came from God, and was God "in the flesh," his life and work

deserved to be seen as significant. Whether as a king, emperor, or widely-acclaimed religious or philosophical leader, Jesus deserved to be treated with honor.

But instead of receiving honor, Jesus received the torture and inhumane execution befitting a traitor or murderer. Rather than a place of esteem, Jesus was stripped bare, mocked and murdered. Through Jesus' death on the cross, Christians believed that He accomplished something more than He ever could have accomplished if He had been just a great political ruler, or well-respected religious or philosophical leader. Through his perfect life and agonizing death, we believe that Jesus redeemed my life, and the lives of all of His followers, for all time. "For Christ died for sins, once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God." *1 Peter 3:18*.

The cross of Christ is the symbol of hope for Christians in the midst of even the most terrible circumstances, for it means that there is meaning and not absurdity in the cruelest of all human sufferings and that, somehow, God will turn our greatest sufferings into our greatest joys. If God would go so far as to allow the death of his own Son in order that we might receive the free gift of salvation, would not God also provide for you and your children? God promises that just as He used Christ's great suffering to bring about great purposes, so also He works in our lives, even in our darkest hours, to accomplish His purposes.

If God loved us so much to allow His one and only son to die, would He not also be working the universe in such a way that it is ultimately for our good? To accept a Biblical view of suffering means that we must live in faith, trusting that there is significantly more going on in our lives than what we can see. Author Mark Galli writes, "God is perfectly just and perfectly merciful, and this we must proclaim right in the midst of the most awful circumstances and in the face of the most mysterious questions. But we proclaim it not glibly, not easily, but in fear and trembling, with nothing to hold on to but faith. We proclaim it not because we know exactly how God will work out his justice and mercy—for this he has steadfastly refused to reveal. What he has revealed to us is that he is perfectly just and perfectly merciful—as demonstrated in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God with us!" *Mark Galli, Trusting God with the Ones You Love, Christianity Today, August, 2011 (web only version)*.

As grieving parents living in faith in Jesus Christ, we can rest in the assurance that our child did **not** die because either God does not love us or that God lacked the power to save our child from death. In the Bible, we find the assurance of God's love for us and our children, of God's sovereign power to control life and death, and through this power, to accomplish God's great and eternal purposes he can accomplish through our suffering the loss of our little children. Without these Biblical promises, there is no substantive hope for the future, no strong and certain basis on which to believe that we will ever know any answers to the "why" questions. But in God, we can grieve along with other grieving parents, having a common foothold in the promises that God is accomplishing all His purposes, even through these dark days of grief.

God's Love For Us And Our Children

It is particularly fitting for grieving parents to focus on the cross of Jesus Christ as a symbol of God's unmatched love for us, for the measure of our love for our deceased child is the same measure of love that was poured out, for us, at the cross. The night before my own son unexpectedly lost consciousness, and later died, my wife told her mother, "I love [our son] Micah so much. I can't imagine the grief that God went through when Jesus died." As a fellow grieving parent, you similarly have a special insight into the level of grief that God the Father must have felt as Jesus was tortured, crucified, forsaken by God the Father, and finally allowed to die. *Matthew 27*. God's love for us compelled Him to allow His one and only son to die. "In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him." *1 John 4:9*.

You and I would give everything, including our very lives, for our deceased children. We know how hard it is to lose our child unwillingly; to willingly give up your only child is absolutely unthinkable. But on that Roman Cross two thousand years ago, God's love for us was proven in how he willing allowed His own son, Jesus Christ, to die for us, that we might be in relationship with Him. If God loved us so much that he allowed Jesus to die, can we not trust His love for us now? About God's great love for us, Paul wrote, "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" *Romans 8:32*.

The cross is also a demonstration of how God's love for us transcends life and death. In the very act of dying, Christ demonstrated that love is greater than death, and that he loves us enough to accomplish great purposes on our behalf even through physical death. "For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." *Romans 8:38-39*. If God allowed His own beloved son to die, can we not also trust that our child's death is not an indication of our being unloved, or of our child being unloved? In our grief, we must hold fast to the cross, where we can see the full measure of God's great love for us.

God's Sovereign Power

Jesus' resurrection from the dead demonstrates His sovereign power over all human history, even the death of our children.

You might be tempted to believe that God was powerless to stop the death of your child. For many parents, securing the physical and emotional well-being of their children is the ultimate objective of life. If we attribute the very same priority to God, then because there is nothing that we could think of that would justify death, we would be left with the conclusion that God was not powerful enough to stop our child's death. Under this mode of thinking, God is on the same side of the "grief ledger," so to speak, and grieves along with us. We need not ask tough questions of God at all, because God was not powerful enough to assist us with avoiding our child's death.

If life were lived outside the control of an all-powerful (“sovereign”) God who controls and directs everything in our lives, then the logical course of action would be to not only physically bury your dead child, but also to take whatever means necessary to mentally bury the memory of your child as well. The pain associated with grieving after your child would be so great that the best course of action would be to bury all of our memories in a black blanket of repression, and to pretend, against all reason, that one’s now-deceased child never existed. One would need to reject, as a mistake, any fleeting thoughts of the child.

But we need not live in a black blanket of memory repression because the Bible clearly promises that God is sovereign and, in his sovereignty, accomplishing His purposes for us and our children. According to the Bible, God will always accomplish the purposes he sets out to do. “I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do will that I please... What I have said, that will I bring about; what I have planned, that will I do.” *Isaiah 46:9-11*.

The Bible assures us that His purposes will be accomplished, whether through God times or bad. Ecclesiastes 7:13-14 says, "Consider what God has done: Who can straighten what he has made crooked? When times are good, be happy; but when times are bad, consider: God has made the one as well as the other." Nothing is outside of God’s control, even the exact length of our child’s lifetime. King David wrote that, “in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.” *Psalms 139:16*. God has purposed some of us to live 100 seconds on this earth; for others, He purposes a life of 100 years. The exact length of our earthly lifetime was set by God even before we were born.

Rather than being thwarted by evil and death, God uses it to accomplish greater purposes. Again and again throughout Biblical history, we see God exercising sovereign power for His great glory. In the book of Genesis, we read that Joseph’s brothers sold him into slavery out of jealousy. Joseph endured numerous and significant sufferings before, miraculously, becoming the Egyptian Pharaoh’s second-in-command. Later, when Joseph’s family was suffering through a great famine, they came to Egypt. There, because God in his sovereignty had placed Joseph in a position of high authority, he was able to save his own family. In Genesis 50:20, Joseph tells his brothers, “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.

Even in the most heinous crimes, the most terrible of circumstances, God is there, using these circumstances for his purposes. The greatest of all human crimes was the betrayal, accusation, condemnation, torture and execution of Jesus. Only through this of all crimes was God’s greatest possible good accomplished, for in suffering as He did for us, Jesus redeemed the otherwise irredeemable. “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God.” *1 Peter 3:18*.

When Jesus rose from the dead, God demonstrated His ultimate sovereign power over death. Death is no longer an insurmountable force, for God has demonstrated that his power is superior. Rather than living in despair, the resurrection of Jesus allows us to live in peace, trusting that God can accomplish all his objectives for us and our deceased child. If Jesus can raise Himself from the dead, does He not also hold the keys to life and death for your child? Based upon God's demonstrated ability to use suffering for our ultimate good, we have the assurance that God will use all of our sufferings, most especially the grief of our infant or young child, in a manner to accomplish purposes far exceeding our grandest expectations.

God's Great And Eternal Purposes In Suffering

Many parents are caught up in the **causes** of their child's death. Some parents are angry about any of the perceived causes of their child's death, even themselves. Other parents become despondent over the seeming absurdity and meaninglessness of their child's death. By focusing on the causes of our child's death, we become caught in an endless cycle of anger, frustration, and discontentment. Even if we were assured of the human cause of our child's death, we would not necessarily believe, or be assured, that any good and useful purpose of our child's death.

Jesus taught that we should focus on the *purposes* that God is accomplishing through suffering such as the death of our child, and not focus on the *causes* of the suffering. In the ninth chapter of the Gospel of John, Jesus and his disciples come across a man who had been blind from birth. There, Jesus is asked why this particular man was born blind. Was the man's blindness caused by the sin of the man's parents or the man's own sin? Jesus takes the opportunity to confront the question of why God allows suffering in the world. Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him." *John 9:3*. Jesus then proceeded to demonstrate His authority over blindness, health, and life itself by immediately healing the man's blindness. *John 9:4*. God purposed the man's blindness from birth in order to provide Jesus, at that very moment, the opportunity to powerfully demonstrate for all of human history His healing power.

Jesus is telling us, as grieving parents, to focus not on how our child died, but on what great and worthy purposes God has done and will do through the infirmity of our own suffering. Of this passage, John Piper says, "The meaning of Jesus [in this passage] is not obscure. He is saying to the disciples: Turn away from your fixation on causality as the decisive explanation of suffering. And turn away from any surrender to futility, or absurdity, or chaos, or meaninglessness. And turn to the purposes and plans of God. There is no child and no suffering outside God's purposes." *John Piper, Why Was this Child Born Blind, Sermon from May 21, 2011, www.desiringgod.org*

If you have lost a child in death, you can trust that God is not punishing you for some sin in the past or some failure on your part to adequately care for your child. Just as the man born blind was not punished for the sins of his parents, so also your child did not die because of your past. Moreover, there is nothing that you could have done to have prevented your child's death. The author and

sustainer of the entire universe purposed that your child should live only as long as he or she lived, not a moment more, not a moment less. We can be assured that God will accomplish his purposes through our child's death, and that we were mere instruments to accomplish those purposes.

Instead of focusing on the causes of how our child died, Jesus calls us to live in faith, that God is accomplishing His predesigned purposes through our child's short life and death. As clearly demonstrated by Jesus, we can rest in the assurance that God is, even through this most difficult times of our life, bringing purpose to our lives by glorifying God in a manner that is, ultimately, for our own good. In the meantime, we can live in faith, being watchful for God uses our sufferings to God's glory and for our good.

Our Suffering is for God's Glory

God's ultimate purpose in our suffering is to cause us to more fully worship Him, to better appreciate His wonderful attributes, and to desire Him above everything else. God prioritizes our acknowledgement of His superior power, love and goodness ahead of anything else in the universe, including our own comfort.

Some argue that God could not possibly desire for us to experience such significant suffering as the death of a child. The implicit assumption with this argument is that God sees the universe exactly as we do. In other words, under this misguided notion, our perception of the greatest "good" that could come from a particular situation is also God's greatest "good." As noted by Randy Alcorn, a child often fails to see the good that is accomplished when parents discipline their child. From the child's standpoint, the parent does not seem to be working for his or her greatest good. Just as children do not have the long-term perspective necessary to see the greater good that can be accomplished through discipline, so also we usually lack God's perspective when it comes to understanding the purposes behind our own suffering. *Randy Alcorn, If God is Good: Faith in the Midst of Suffering (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah, 2009).*

Particularly in an age of human history where we make much of "human rights," it seems that the worst thing God could do is take away our "rights" to a safe, comfortable life. But nowhere does the Bible apologize for the suffering that followers of Christ may experience during their earthly lifetimes. Jesus' encounter with this first-century Palestinian blind man in John 9 underscores the fact that God not allows significant suffering in order to best glorify His own divine attributes. In this encounter from the Gospel of John, we see that God clearly purposed this particular man's suffering in order to give Jesus this opportunity, at this brief moment in history, to demonstrate God's glory.

Consider the suffering of the blind man as he lived in blindness in first-century Palestine. He did not benefit from those modern conveniences available to blind men & women. In addition to these daily physical difficulties that must have accompanied his blindness, the man suffered from the

social stigma that accompanied blindness in that culture. From his birth, the man was an outcast. He was forced to endure the scorn and ridicule of those who believed that his blindness was a result of sin. And yet, ultimately, the man's blindness allowed him to encounter, face-to-face, the living God incarnate, and to become His follower.

Throughout scripture, we see God elevating His own glory, even through the significant sufferings of his servants. In the days of the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, God brought the nation of Israel through significant sufferings. About this suffering, God tells them, "See I have refined you, though not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction. For my own sake, for my own sake, I do this. *Isaiah 48:10*. In the early church, the Apostle Paul encouraged the young church by teaching that God's glory was manifested through how God was transforming them through sufferings. "And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasingly glory." *2 Corinthians 3:18*. As grieving parents, we can rest in the assurance that our sufferings ultimately have a great and noble purpose: our sufferings bring glory to God.

Our Suffering Is For Our Good

God's purposes in suffering are not only for His own glory, but also ultimately for our own good. The story in John 9 of the man born blind provides Jesus with the occasion to demonstrate that the man's suffering was ultimately for the man's own good. After Jesus heals the man's blindness, the man later has occasion to meet with Jesus, where Jesus shares with the man His identity as the Messiah. By reason of the healing, the man accepted Jesus as His Savior. *John 9:38*. If you could speak with that man now, in heaven, I am certain that he would tell you that he is *glad* that he was born blind. His blindness turned out to be for his good, because it provided him the occasion to meet with Jesus and, ultimately, to become His devoted follower.

One of the great wonders of the gospel of Jesus Christ is that the plan which most glorifies God is also what is best for us. Our good and God's glory are not at odds. John Piper preaches that "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him." God's greatest gift to us is himself. "If He withholds Himself from our contemplation and companionship, no matter what else He gives us, He is not loving." *John Piper, Desiring God (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah, 1986, rev 2003), 48*.

The ultimate good that God has for us is not what is most comfortable to us. In exchange for the safe, comfortable life to which we think we are entitled, God calls us to a life far more difficult and strenuous than what we would choose, but far more spiritually challenging and fruitful than we could ever fathom. The Bible promises that God "works all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." *Romans 8:28*. In times like these, when we don't see or feel how God is using our child's death for our good, we must trust that what God is doing really is for our good. Ultimately, we will learn that God did indeed have our best in mind.

If you are suffering through the death of a child, isn't it possible that, just as God used the blind man's infirmity to glorify himself, God will also work through your weakness to glorify himself? Isn't it also possible that, as of this moment, we cannot grasp everything that has occurred and will occur by reason of your child's death, and that God will use your child's death to accomplish many and varied good things, whether in your life or the lives of others?

How God Uses Suffering For Our Good

While we cannot know all of the specific purposes God will accomplish through the death of our child, the Bible provides us with a description of *how* God will use our suffering for our good and to His glory. Among other means by which God might bring himself glory through are the following four:

- To Make Us Dependent Upon God
- To Cause Us to Examine Our Priorities
- To Make Us More Like Jesus
- To Make Us Yearn For Heaven

As clearly seen in the story of the man born blind and recounted in John chapter 9, God accomplished **multiple purposes** through the man's blindness. Similarly, in the death of our own child, God will accomplish multiple purposes. The number of variables involved in God's calculations for determining the best results for us would surpass the computing ability of the world's most powerful computers. Paul may have caught a glimpse of God's unfathomable wisdom when He wrote, "How unsearchable are your judgements, and your paths beyond tracing out."
Romans 11:33.

For that reason, we should never feel like we have arrived at understanding all of the purposes that God has accomplished. It would be highly presumptuous of us to think we know all of the meanings related to our child's death when we lack the omnipotence to fully understand how God uses human events to achieve his purposes.

Since God is the one to set and accomplish His purposes, we ought to approach the question of purpose with great humility and without any presumptions whatsoever. We should never presume that we know, for certain, the relative importance of human events, or that we know what God has done through particular human events. As demonstrated in the Bible, God can use a number of life events, some great and some small, to achieve his purposes. We ought never deem any events in our lives as insignificant, nor should we deem the lives of "the least of these" as insignificant.

Following the death of our child, we should not judge our child's eternal significance by such cosmetic factors as lifespan, career accomplishments, or community contributions. We don't know everything that God has accomplished through our now-deceased child.

Lorraine Boettner says, "Clearly, accomplishment in life cannot be measured in terms of years alone. It often happens that those that die young have accomplished more than others who live to old age. Even infants, who sometimes have been with their parents only a few days, or even hours, may leave profound influences that change the entire course of the life of the family. And undoubtedly, from the Divine viewpoint, the specific purpose for which they were sent into the world was accomplished. It is our right to neither to end life prematurely, or to insist on its extension beyond the mark that God has set for it." *Lorraine Boettner, Immortality (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1975).*

Once we begin to see how the death of our child has changed our own lives, we can begin to imagine how he or she has also impacted others. Maybe your child's death has impacted others to a greater extent than you even imagine. But based upon what you know of your child's legacy in your own life, we might begin to imagine what eternal purposes were accomplished by God that we didn't even see, in our life and in other lives, both in our generation and future generations. In a funeral sermon given for an infant boy who lived only ten minutes, Pastor John Piper noted, "God's designs for [the boy] were decided before he was born. He would exist for the glory of God. Ten minutes of that work was on the earth. The rest will be in heaven. None of us can even begin to estimate the magnitude of either. Who knows what has been set in motion on earth by the birth and death and life of [your child]. It would be wild and unwarranted folly to think he has not changed the world." *John Piper, Funeral Meditation for Owen Glenn Shramek, October 23, 2003, www.desiringgod.org*

To Make Us Dependent Upon God

God may be using your child's death to make you utterly dependent upon Him for your strength. If you were like me, your child's death drove you to your knees. Your child's death shattered your conception that tragedy and heartbreak is what happens to "other people." Before your child died, you might have lived in the same "bubble" that I did. While tragedy might happen in the Middle East, or Haiti, or to anyone else on the nightly news, it doesn't happen to me. But with the death of your child, your bubble has burst; so has your conception of self-reliance and self-determination.

The Bible teaches us that suffering can be used to break our sense of self-reliance and cause us to find all of our strength in God alone. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus emphasized the humility that accompanies grief. He said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." *Matthew 5:3-4*. Rather than claiming that His followers would be blessed by health and wealth, Jesus claims that through suffering, His followers would be blessed by the ability to rely wholly and completely on God. Indeed, in the

Gospel of John, Jesus audaciously claims that “apart from me you can do nothing.” *John 15:5*. If only Jesus can provide us with the sufficient strength, then it is for our ultimate God that we should be relieved of the burden of self-sufficiency, so that we might turn to God and be fully dependent upon God.

In his second letter to the Corinthian church, Paul explains why it is that Christians are called to suffering. In 2 Corinthians 1:8-9 Paul says, “For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raised the dead.” To the extent that you, your family or your friends have cried out to God in tears, or even asked difficult questions of God for the first time, than your child’s death served a very noble purpose. For the first time, you, your family or your friends might have abandoned any sense of self-sufficiency. Joseph Stowell says, “Self-sufficiency is a terrible place to be because it is the worst deceit you can bring on yourself. You need God. You need God every minute of your life. I believe God knows that, and He desires fellowship and dependency from you, radical dependency in terms of your relationship with Him.” *Dr. Joseph Stowell, Grief Share, Day 258*.

Through suffering, God rids us of our illusion of self-sufficiency so that we can become more dependent upon God. Through significant suffering, we can turn to the only true source of strength and contentment, Jesus Christ. James Hudson Taylor wrote, “May this be your experience; may you feel that the Hand which inflicts the wound supplies the balm, and that He who has emptied your heart has filled the void with Himself.” In these days of suffering, God calls us to turn from looking to our own strength to the one who ultimately gives strength. I hope that you find, like I did, that the death of your child has caused you to become more and more dependent upon Him, the ultimate source of strength and purpose.

To Cause Us To Examine Our Priorities

The death of your child has undoubtedly caused you to examine the priorities in your life.

What you once deemed so important seems irrelevant. It would be a tragic mistake to reject the implications to you of your child’s own death. If you have not yet thought deeply about your own mortality, now is the time to do so. “Death serves to draw our attention to what really matters—the state of our souls, and the God and people who will outlast this life. Death is a wake-up call, a reminder that our time here is fleeting and everyone’s going to die.” *Randy Alcorn, If God is Good, 404*. In a culture where we take great steps to avoid conversations about our own mortality, our child’s death serves us notice that we ought to be concerned about eternal things—most specifically, the state of our own souls.

In Psalm 39, David prays a prayer that most contemporary Americans would not pray. He prays that we would not be caught up in fleeting matters of earth.

“O Lord, make me know my end And what is the measure of my days; Let me know how fleeting I am! Behold, you have made my days a few handbreadths, And my lifetime is as nothing before you. Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath! Surely a man goes about as a shadow! Surely for nothing they are in turmoil; Man reaps up wealth and does not know who will gather!” Psalm 39:4-6.

By knowing your end, and how fleeting your life is, you won't get caught up in inconsequential matters, such as collecting wealth and the consuming it. If we really had a grasp on how short life is, how many of us would be as concerned as we are with our financial situation? Or the future of our career? While our society is build around valuing income, title, prestige and personal consumption, the death of our child allows us to acknowledge that none of these things are lasting, and may, in fact, get in the way of what is truly important in our lives.

Carolyn Arends writes, “Death unaddressed is the bogeyman in the basement; it keeps us looking over our shoulders and holds us back from entering joyously into the days we are given. But death dragged out from the shadows and held up to the light of the gospel not only loses its sting, it becomes an essential reminder to wisely use the life we have.” *Arends, Going Down Singing, Christianity Today, April 2011*. Since my son's death, I have been blessed to have a clearer understanding of my own mortality, the mortality of my family and friends, and a greater desire to depart and be with Jesus and my son. I hope that, through your child's death, you would develop a more realistic understanding of the brevity and nature of this earthly, temporary existence, what is truly important, and how to make maximum use of your short time on earth.

To Make Us More Like Jesus

The unspeakable suffering experienced by grieving parents will be used by God to make us more like Jesus. Outside of the fact that God is involved in suffering to accomplish his purposes, there is absolutely no redeeming value to suffering. In athletic circles, a coach might tell his players during conditioning drills that, “What doesn't kill you only makes you stronger.” But what works in athletics is certainly not true in the death of a child. There is no way that a mother or father would be strong and wise enough to use the grief of a child's death to become a better person on their own. In other words, there is no Biblical basis to believe in suffering for suffering's sake. If it were up to us, we would have no ability to turn our suffering for good.

But because God is involved in our sufferings, our sufferings can be redeemed. Through suffering, God develops in us Christ-like character attributes, and we learn that the “greatest good of the Christian life is not absence of pain but Christ-likeness.” *Joni Eareckson Tada and Steven Estes, When God Weeps: Why Our Sufferings Matter to the Almighty (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), 234*. This Christ-likeness is important not only because our souls are eternal, but also because he need this Christ-likeness to get through our grief.

Paul wrote the epistles to young Christians who were enduring significant hardships. “We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed, perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.” *2 Corinthians 4:8-10*. As grieving parents, we know what it is like to be “hard pressed,” “perplexed” and even “struck down.” Our family and friends can see how we suffer, emotionally and physically, from our own grief. Even now, several years later, I “carry around” my grief in the sense that I cannot physically possess my son. As opposed to other parents I observe who seem to have their young children attached at the hip, we “carry around” our grief in the sense that we don’t have our children with us.

To the extent that we rely upon Jesus in our suffering, we develop a hope for the future, and in the process reveal Jesus “in our body” by demonstrating for any other observers where our help ultimately comes from. In the book of Romans, we are promised that suffering “produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.” *Romans 5:3-4*. Family and friends know how difficult our sufferings have been, and therefore could testify as to miraculous it is (or would be) if we choose to live in hope for the future. Holding on to hope is good for us now in the midst of our grief. But in addition to being good for us, it glorifies God, as those who observe a renewed hope rising out our lives have nowhere to attribute this miracle than to God.

By relying upon Jesus in the midst of our suffering, we develop a hope in God that glorifies Him and is good for us. Jesus says, “I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.” *John 15:5-6*. We are called to hope in God, even now, that we might develop the type of endurance necessary to hope in God until we see our children again.

To Cause Us To Yearn For Heaven

If you trust in the saving work of Jesus Christ on your behalf, then the death of your infant child heightens your desire for Heaven. For those who are redeemed by Christ’s blood, the Bible promises that death is not the end. In fact, it is only the beginning of an eternal relationship with God and with other fellow believers. Now, by reason of the death of your child, the day of our Lord’s coming tastes so much sweeter because, in addition to meeting Jesus Christ, we can see our children again.

In 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, Paul writes to one of the early churches in order to encourage them regarding the whereabouts of deceased Christians. He writes, “But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen

asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore, encourage one another with these words.”

In Philippians 1:8, Paul tells the church at Philippi that he “*yearns* for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus.” Appropriately, the Greek word used in Philippians 1:8 for “yearn” is also used by Paul in the fifth chapter of 2 Corinthians where Paul is referring to the believer’s hope in Heaven. In 2 Corinthians 5:1-2, Paul writes, “For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this tent *we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling*, if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked.”

In the absence of our grief, we might have been relatively satisfied in our earthly lives. Before your child’s death, you enjoyed the comforts of earth and the love and affection of an intact family. Now, however, with our families torn apart by death, we yearn, we groan, in anticipation of the resurrection of the dead. When we last hear the “cry of command” and “the voice of the archangel,” we will know that the Lord has come, and we will be last be reunited with all members of our family.

About Heaven, Paul writes, “...no eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.” *2 Corinthians 2:9*. We are promised that our reunion will be not only greater than what we hope it will be, we are told that it will be greater than anything we can even conceive of! Along with so many other parents, children and spouses who have lost loved ones, the death of our son has caused us to yearn with increasing ardor past our present circumstances towards the coming resurrection, when we will, at last see him again.