



## ***Prescriptions for the Heart***

### **Coping with the Death of a Child**

Children are the greatest gift that we are given in our lifetime. God entrusts them to us and we expect to raise, teach, and then send on their own journeys through life. They become our heart and soul the minute they take their first breath. Our love for them cannot be explained, only felt in our hearts. That is why dealing with the death of a child is one of the hardest emotional crises parents can face, no matter what their age may be when they leave us.

When a child dies, it is common for parents to be overcome with a deep sense of loss and grief for which nothing could have prepared them. Nothing anyone can say or do can take away the pain they feel. Being around a supportive family and loved ones is surely comforting, but faith is crucial during this time, as well; for God is the only true source of the kind of healing that needs to take place.

Sometimes parents feel guilt and blame themselves, or others, or, depending on how the child died, they may even blame the child. It is common for even the most religious people to blame God, since it seems sensible that He knew what was going to happen and could have prevented it had He wanted to do so. It is good to remember, when doubts arise, that God understands our pain (having witnessed His own Son's death) and He patiently listens to our questions, as He did in the case of the biblical character Job, all of whose seven children died in the same catastrophe. But most of all God wants to comfort us in our troubles "...so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God" (2 Corinthians 1:4).<sup>1</sup>

Jesus understands the pain of living in our world. He said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). Finding such peace may seem impossible, especially soon after the loss of your child, but He is patient and gentle when we feel like a candle burning out or a bent piece of grass that is about to break. As Matthew 12:20 described Him, "A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out...." He is like a friend who sticks closer than a brother, especially in times of great distress, so we can always cast our cares upon Him, knowing that He cares for us (see Proverbs 18:24; 1 Peter 5:7).

Often, depression occurs following the loss of a child. If you are depressed, talk with your doctor about prescription medications that can speed your recovery. Having a good counselor can also provide much needed support. And a supportive pastor and church family are also essential.

Over time, a strong spiritual foundation will be your best basis for healing of your heart and mind. Your relationship with Jesus Christ can help you carry the burden of your loss and bring the light of His love into the darkness of your pain, for He said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12). Some who have experienced similar losses have testified that, though the journey with grief was long and hard, their faith actually grew deeper and stronger after their loss.

Your doctor may also recommend a variety of resources to help you through this dark time in your life. A number of books relating to the loss of a child have been written, the most helpful of them being penned by people who have walked a path similar to your own. While these books are as unique as the people who wrote them, several common points have been made that may be helpful to you.

One of the most important lessons shared by your fellow pilgrims is to do all you can to preserve your marriage, since an estimated 80 percent of marriages fail following the loss of a child. This result is most likely because grief is so highly personal that spouses are not often able to support each other very well, without professional help. In other words, husbands and wives usually grieve differently, and too often, separately, and this can create a wedge between them that neither recognizes before it has become very hard to recover.

Another valuable piece of advice, based on experience, is that, if you have other children in your home, your relationship with them will need attention as well. For one thing, you knew each other as a family unit before the death occurred. In other words, your knowledge of an experience with the ones who remain involved the one who has died. Now you all need to establish a different way of communicating and relating, and this takes time and energy. In addition, the surviving sibling or siblings need to know that even though you experience such pain over the loss of the other, you still love them and value them very much. It is, unfortunately, common for bereaved parents to become so focused on their loss that the remaining children feel emotionally abandoned. This, again, is where a good family counselor can help everyone understand the dynamics and learn to help each other.

Whatever happens, be assured that there is hope for tomorrow, for “The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit” (Psalm 34:18).

If you do not have a pastor or a church family to help address your needs, your doctor can refer you to a pastor in your community who would be happy to meet and pray with you about coping with your loss.

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