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RESOURCING MEMBERS OF HIGHLANDS COMMUNITY  
CHURCH, RENTON, WASHINGTON, TO MINISTER  
TO BEREAVED PARENTS

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A Ministry Project  
Presented to  
the Faculty of  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Ministry

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by  
Jesse Austin Campbell

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**APPROVAL SHEET**

RESOURCING MEMBERS OF HIGHLANDS COMMUNITY  
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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF TABLES .....	vi
PREFACE .....	vii
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION .....	1
Context .....	1
Rationale .....	2
Purpose .....	3
Goals .....	3
Research Methodology .....	4
Definitions and Limitations/Delimitations .....	6
Conclusion .....	7
2. THE BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL BASIS FOR THE PROJECT .....	8
Do Babies Who Die Go to Heaven? .....	8
The Bible Passages that Inspired the Project .....	12
Psalm 34:18–20 .....	12
Job 1:7–22 and 13:15 .....	14
John 9:1–3 .....	19
2 Samuel 12:1–25 .....	21
Matthew 18:10–14 .....	23
2 Corinthians 4:16–5:10 .....	27
Ruth 1:1–5, 19–22; 4:9–22 .....	31

Chapter	Page
3. THEORETICAL, PRACTICAL, AND HISTORICAL ISSUES RELATED TO BEREAVEMENT MINISTRY .....	35
The Bereavement Views and Pastoral Practices of the Reformers .....	35
The Voice of Candor .....	35
The Softening of Doctrine and Its Effects .....	39
Divergences among the Magisterial Reformers .....	40
Bereavement Ministry in the Reformers' Historical Context.....	42
Reviving the Reformers' Bereavement Practices .....	42
The Comparative Strength of Christian Resources on Infant Loss and Miscarriage.....	43
Addressing Eternity .....	45
Describing Innocence .....	47
Hope Eternal or Hope Impotent?.....	48
The Weakness of Grief Resources and the Promise of Bible Studies for Bereavement.....	51
When Christian Resources Fail .....	53
The Hope of Sound Bible Study .....	54
The Wonderful Counselor Ministering to Bereaved Parents.....	57
4. DETAILS AND DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT .....	58
Description of the Preparation Period .....	58
Writing the Sermons .....	60
Planning the Conference around the Sermon Scriptures .....	67
Description of the Implementation Period .....	69
Description of the Follow-Up Period.....	70
5. EVALUATION OF THE PROJECT .....	73
Evaluation of the Project's Purpose .....	73
Evaluation of the Project's Goals.....	74
Goal 1: Recruit Parents through the Survey .....	74

	Page
Goal 2: Develop a Curriculum for Bereaved Parents .....	75
Goal 3: Increase Biblical and Theological Knowledge .....	77
Goal 4: Gather Proposed Revisions to the Curriculum .....	78
Strengths of the Project .....	79
Weaknesses of the Project.....	81
What I Would Do Differently .....	82
Theological Reflections .....	85
Personal Reflections.....	86
 Appendix	
1. BEREAVED PARENT SURVEY .....	89
2. CURRICULUM EVALUATION RUBRIC.....	92
3. COMPLETED EVALUATION RUBRICS PROVIDED BY EXPERT PANEL .....	93
4. PRE-CURRICULUM AND POST-CURRICULUM SURVEY DATA RESULTS.....	97
5. PRE-CURRICULUM AND POST-CURRICULUM SURVEY RESPONSES.....	98
6. POST-CURRICULUM SURVEY OPEN RESPONSES TO THE STUDY.....	100
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	103

## LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
A1. Template for the curriculum evaluation rubric.....	92
A2. T. J. Betts, professor, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.....	93
A3. Poly Rouse, senior pastor, Hermitage Hills Baptist Church.....	94
A4. Michele Jancola, women’s ministry expert.....	95
A5. Erin Irvin, neonatal intensive care unit nurse.....	96
A6. T-test results from the pre-curriculum and post-curriculum survey responses.....	97
A7. Pre-curriculum test results.....	98
A8. Post-curriculum test results.....	99
A9. Unedited responses to the open text field question in the post curriculum survey.....	100

## PREFACE

My bride, Jessica “Jessi” Campbell, appropriated a large share of my parental duties to make this project possible. My parents poured their hearts out before the camera to help make this curriculum known. Without the staff of Highlands Community Church, the logistics of the Aiden’s Hope conference would not have been a reality. The church’s Executive Pastor Nick Dalgardno, Communications Director David Newcomb, and Media Director Spencer Clem created the space in which this resource could be implemented. The church’s Adult Ministries Pastor Tom Dabasinskas, Women’s Ministries Director Michele Jancola, and administrative assistants Alicia Fiess and Dana Englehart shepherded hearts and handled the conference’s detailed planning with affectionate care. It has been an incredible blessing to work with Dr. Michael Pohlman, my doctoral supervisor. Dr. Eric Geiger, Dr. Bill Craig, and Dr. Philip Nation inspired me to pursue this project for the church while they were my colleagues at LifeWay Christian Resources. Hermitage Hills Baptist Church generously blessed my family with scholarships as has Highlands Community Church. The beloved family of First Baptist Church Windermere held Aiden when he was alive and held our family when Aiden died.

Finally, I am grateful for my son, Aiden Isaiah Campbell, named for the prophet who saw God and who, along with Isaiah, sees God now. May God use this project to further the incredible ministry ignited by Aiden’s enormous little life.

Jesse Austin Campbell

Renton, Washington

December 2019

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Our son, Aiden Isaiah Campbell, named for the prophet who saw God, sees God now after three tumultuous and triumphant months of ecstasy, anguish, prayer, medical pioneering, and spiritual revival. His life and death bestow on me a heavy mantle. My wife, Jessica (“Jessi”), and I are not the only parents who grieve. Though statistics change, approximately one third of all pregnancies in the United States end in miscarriage.<sup>1</sup> How many parents have secretly grieved an untold loss alongside us in worship and sat before us from the pulpit? Bereaved parents both saved and lost need the healing that comes through the gospel alone.

#### **Context**

Highlands Community Church (HCC) is a well-established church in the greater Seattle, Washington, metropolitan area. Combining the large Renton campus and the smaller Highlands Kent campus, HCC averages one thousand in attendance each weekend. The demographic makeup of HCC is primarily Anglo, with a median age of forty. At the zenith of the church’s membership bell curve are young families with children. These figures are consistent with the demographic data of Renton as a whole, wherein 59.6 percent of the population is between the ages of 18 and 65, the average number of people per household is 2.54, and the percentage of the population is well over the national average at 7.6 percent. Renton and Kent are two of the most ethnically diverse cities in the United States. The average income and education levels exceed the national averages but are often off-set by the above-average living costs in the greater

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<sup>1</sup> Center for Disease Control and Prevention, “Vital Statistics Online Data Portal,” accessed July 19, 2017, [https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data\\_access/vitalstatsonline.htm](https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data_access/vitalstatsonline.htm).

Seattle area.<sup>2</sup> I serve as the Lead Pastor at HCC.

According to the American Medical Association, 30 percent of women of child-bearing age have had miscarriages.<sup>3</sup> On a given Sunday, more than one hundred women ages 18–40 attend worship at HCC. Applying the American Medical Association’s statistic regarding miscarriage to those women who are of child-bearing age, it follows that roughly thirty such women are present each week in worship at HCC. To approximate the total number of HCC women who have suffered a miscarriage, including those who are no longer of child-bearing age, there are over ninety wounded women worshipping side-by-side. Add to this number the parents who have lost infants. The United States infant mortality rate is higher than that of some second world countries.<sup>4</sup> As per this data, 180 bereaved parents sit disguised and silently devastated in the pews of HCC, and this morbid fraternity is going to grow. Now, what is Highlands Community Church prepared to do?

### **Rationale**

HCC does not currently have a ministry, program, or planned study that focuses on this prominent and urgent need. I preach to a thousand faces each week, and I do not know which are the 180 faces of bereaved parents. It is time to call the silent sufferers forward and let the gospel bring healing to their hearts. The question “Do babies that die go to heaven?” lingers torturously unanswered in the sanctuary air. They do not ask the question that keeps them awake at night: “Did my baby die because of my sin?”

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<sup>2</sup> United States Census Bureau, “Quick Facts: Renton City, Washington,” last modified July 1, 2016, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/rentoncitywashington>.

<sup>3</sup> Jonah Bardos et al., “A National Survey on Public Perceptions of Miscarriage,” *Obstetrics and Gynecology* 125, no. 6 (June 2015): 1320.

<sup>4</sup> Using data from the Central Intelligence Agency, the world-wide infant mortality rate (defined by the number of deaths of infants under one year old in a given year per 1,000 live births in the same year) ranges from Afghanistan’s 112.80 to Monaco’s 1.8. The infant mortality rate in the United States is 5.8, ranking it the 169th worst among the 225 measured, with Afghanistan as number 1 and Monaco as number 225. Central Intelligence Agency, “The World Factbook: Infant Mortality Rate,” accessed July 29, 2017, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2091rank.html>.

To voice such a question would reveal too much. They do not explain their deliberate absence from worship on Mother’s Day—it would devastate people. They think it impolite to ask, “Why does God allow babies to die?” They may have no idea that these questions themselves are drawing everyone to the gospel itself—the source of their ultimate healing for their grief. A resource that brings scriptural light to these pressing questions and then directs that light to Jesus is desperately needed. It would break the pall of silence permeating Highlands Community Church and would help other churches break theirs as well.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this project was to develop a gospel-centered resource to serve families who have suffered miscarriage and infant loss, beginning with the bereaved parents of Highlands Community Church.

### **Goals**

The following four goals were established to determine the success of this urgent cause. Should each goal be achieved, then HCC would have a biblically sound and gospel-centered resource with which it can minister to the bereaved.

1. Recruit parents bereaved by infant loss and miscarriage through a confidential survey that registers them for the study at HCC.
2. Develop a six-session curriculum on how the gospel gives hope to parents bereaved by infant loss and miscarriage.
3. Increase biblical and theological knowledge on infant loss and the gospel.
4. Gather proposed revisions to the curriculum.

This collective of goals represents a process whose ultimate aim was to lift up Jesus, who alone is able to heal the hearts of mourning parents. It has proven to be an asset to HCC and will hopefully bless future churches after publication.

## **Research Methodology**

The first goal was to recruit the initial group to use the first version of the curriculum by inviting them to respond to a delicately worded Google Form survey that confidentially assessed their biblical and theological understanding of infant loss (see appendix 1). This survey doubled as registration for the group. This goal was measured by the number of HCC members who attended in person and the number of online guests who attended via LiveBible.TV. This goal was considered successfully met when twenty-five bereaved parents completed the pre-curriculum survey.

The second goal was to develop the six-session curriculum that increased the biblical and theological knowledge of bereaved parents concerning miscarriage and infant loss while presenting the gospel throughout. This goal was measured by an expert panel who utilized a rubric to evaluate the biblical faithfulness, theological accuracy, appropriately empathetic delivery, and applicability of the curriculum (see appendix 2). This panel consisted of a medical expert, a Southern Baptist Convention seminary professor, a seasoned pastor with a doctorate, and a woman of God who had experience in this ministry focus.

To comfort non-Christians by redeeming a tool from secular psychology, each session started with a recitation of Psalm 34:18–20, followed by a unison recitation of the following phrase: “My legs weren’t broken by this. I stood up again, and now I’m here because I love my child. There is still life after this.” This phrase’s purpose was revealed in the final session of the curriculum.

The first three sessions addressed the question “Why did my baby die?” The first answer to “Why?” was demonic warfare. The second answer to “Why?” was that some babies are born with deep affliction that the works of God might be displayed in them. The third was that God may judge people for sin by taking their children. Session 1 taught the first answer to “Why?” from Job 1:7–22 and 13:15 (with cross references). Session 2 taught the second answer to “Why?” from John 9:1–3 (with cross references). Session 3 taught the third and most difficult answer to “Why?” from 2 Samuel 12:1–25

and by pointing to the gospel, which exalts Jesus as God's Son who died for sin.

Session 4 examined Jesus's use of a child to teach about heaven in Matthew 18:10–14 (with cross-references). It also used Jesus's primary purpose in Matthew 18 to point to the gospel. Session 5 fixed all eyes heavenward and then suddenly ended with a jarring word of God's coming judgment, further drawing people to the gospel with 2 Corinthians 4:16–5:10. Session 6 started with the bereavement found in Ruth 1:1–5, 19–22 and then connected Ruth 4:9–22 to Matthew 1:1, 5–6, 16 to show how God was working through Naomi and Ruth's bereavement to bring about the gospel. Then, the prophetic purpose of Psalm 34:18–20 (i.e., the verses recited before each session) was shown in John 19:33–37. The unison-recitation phrase ("My legs weren't broken by this. I stood up again, and now I'm here because I love my child. There is life after this life!") further illuminated the connection as I led them in a new responsive reading. By showing that Psalm 34 is truly about Jesus, the phrase's true purpose was revealed in a reconfigured recitation: "Jesus' legs weren't broken by the crucifixion. Jesus stood up again, and now Jesus is here because He loves His children. There is still life after this life!" It has been about Jesus, the Son who died and then rose again, all along. In Jesus's name, bereaved parents who were lost heard the gospel, believed by the Holy Spirit, and were reconciled to their heavenly children. Amen.

The second goal was considered successfully met when a minimum of 90 percent of the evaluation criterion met or exceeded the sufficient level. If the 90 percent benchmark was not initially met, the material was revised until it met the standard.

The third goal was to increase the knowledge of attendees. This goal was measured by administering a Google Form post-curriculum survey completed by at least 25 attendees who also completed the pre-curriculum survey and by measuring the change in biblical and theological knowledge. The survey opened with questions that eliminated unqualified respondents and served to record decisions made for Christ. Thereafter, a set of questions evaluated each attendee's knowledge of the curriculum's focal Scriptures. A

t-test for dependent samples “involves a comparison of the means from each group of scores and focuses on the differences between the scores.”<sup>5</sup> Since this project involved a single group of the same subjects being surveyed under two conditions, a t-test of dependent samples was the appropriate test statistic. This goal was successfully met because the t-test for dependent samples demonstrated a positive statistically significant difference in the pre-curriculum and post-curriculum survey scores. Text fields in the post-curriculum survey facilitated additional feedback for the refining of the curriculum.

The fourth goal was to gather proposed curriculum revisions. This goal was measured by whether revisions were suggested in the post-curriculum survey’s text field and whether the t-test results illuminated aspects of the curriculum that required improvement. This goal was considered successfully met when the results were processed and the proposed revisions were documented.

### **Definitions and Limitations/Delimitations**

The following definition of a key term was used in this ministry project:

*Infant.* For the purposes of this project, an infant is defined as a baby who has been born alive and is twelve months old or younger. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention’s work supports this definition.<sup>6</sup>

This project had two delimitations. First, parents whose babies were killed by abortion were not addressed directly in this curriculum. While love is extended to the

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<sup>5</sup> Neil J. Salkind, *Statistics for People Who (Think They) Hate Statistics*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2008), 191. All of the research instruments used in this project were performed in compliance with and approved by The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Research Ethics Committee prior to use in this ministry project.

<sup>6</sup> “In the first year, babies learn to focus their vision, reach out, explore, and learn about the things that are around them. Cognitive, or brain, development means the learning process of memory, language, thinking, and reasoning. Learning language is more than making sounds (“babble”), or saying “ma-ma” and “da-da”. Listening, understanding, and knowing the names of people and things are all a part of language development. During this stage, babies also are developing bonds of love and trust with their parents and others as part of social and emotional development. The way parents cuddle, hold, and play with their baby will set the basis for how they will interact with them and others.” Center for Disease Control and Prevention, “Child Development,” accessed July 20, 2017, <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/childdevelopment/positiveparenting/infants.html>.

parents of aborted babies, and while there is certainly forgiveness from God for such parents who are drawn by the Holy Spirit and repent from sin, ministering to them would require a different environment and approach. The systematic arrangement of Scripture forming this curriculum, while certainly capable of ministering to the parents of aborted babies, was not arranged for them specifically—that type of situation would require a different systematic theology entirely. Pastorally, it would be unwise to minister to these very different ministry contexts in close proximity to each other. The grieving parent of a miscarried baby would be distracted at best, and ungracious at worst, were he or she to learn that another group member *chose* to lose a child. The second delimitation is that minors were not allowed to participate in the research or the study.

### **Conclusion**

The greatest means of healing the church can provide bereaved parents is the gospel. Its power for non-Christians is obvious, but it is also healing for Christian parents of the same dark fraternity. Seeing the gospel at work amidst their greatest pain, bereaved Christian parents may fix their eyes on the unseen where their children await them and where there is no more crying, or death, or pain. Their children reside where they will one day also be—where the dwelling of God is with humankind. This dreaded cup has been given to bereaved parents; thus, they are to emulate the Savior and drink deeply. It is not one's own will but God's that ought to be done. Believers with sin-stained finite minds fail but try nonetheless to imagine the crucifixion from the Father's perspective. When they see what glory God brought about through the death of his Son, believers are inspired to do likewise and minister from their pain. As they see spiritual fruit born from their children's testimonies, their ever-wounded hearts find some healing and know that God may work all things, even the bleakest of things, for their ultimate good—namely, for the spread of the gospel. Thus, even Christian parents may be ministered to by the very gospel which they already believe.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL BASIS FOR THE PROJECT

The Bible’s numerous passages about child loss demand, by the inspired nature of God’s Word, to be taught. The numerous lives impacted by child loss cry out for biblical wisdom and gospel-centered healing. It was these select passages of Scripture which together called for this project, and this project would not have been undertaken were it not for the Spirit’s call to apply these passages most aptly by sharing them with bereaved parents and pointing these bedraggled and afflicted souls to the healing found in the gospel alone. As Paul wrote, “All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16–17).<sup>1</sup> Each passage, then, is inspired and assimilates to form the collective impetus behind this project.

#### **Do Babies Who Die Go to Heaven?**

The Bible does not contain a definitive statement on the eternal destinations of babies who die. However, it does give bereaved parents reason to hope. It gives reason to hope, but nothing more. Ultimately, the only healing that a bereaved parent may receive is the gospel. There is no psychological, psychiatric, or pharmacological treatment that may heal a grieving parent’s heart the way that the gospel may heal it eternally. Not even knowledge that one’s child is in heaven would bring such healing. So, this curriculum did not make assertions that lack solid biblical basis; but, it did draw upon Scripture to offer parents the hope that Scripture provides. It gave what hope the Bible contains, but it did

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the Christian Standard Bible.

not stretch to give hope that cannot be rooted in Scripture. A theologian must be willing to accept that which is commonly considered unspeakable, namely, the possibility that babies would go to hell after their swift deaths. Upon the objectivity of, and devotion to, the rightful teaching of God’s Word, said theologian may sincerely believe that bereaved parents have hope—hope comes from the Bible. It is not a guarantee, but it is hope nevertheless, and hope has immense value.

Passages used to argue for the colloquially held narrative that all babies go to heaven include David’s statement in 2 Samuel 12:23, the promise spoken over Jeremiah in Jeremiah 1:5, and Abraham’s plea in Genesis 18:25.<sup>2</sup> When David’s son, who was conceived through David’s sexual immorality with Bathsheba, passed away, and David suddenly recovered from his grief—much to the surprise of his counsel—he replied, “But now that he is dead, why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I’ll go to him, but he will never return to me.”<sup>3</sup> The problem with 2 Samuel 12:23 as a biblical basis for infant, or fetus, salvation is that David was referring to Sheol, and Sheol is not the New Testament understanding of the promised heaven. In fact, scriptural references to Sheol pertain predominantly to the ungodly.<sup>4</sup>

Describing how God prophesied that the unborn Jeremiah was preordained unto ministry, Jeremiah 1:5 reads, “I chose you before I formed you in the womb; I set you apart before you were born. I appointed you a prophet to the nations.” The problem with Jeremiah 1:5 as a biblical basis for infant, or fetus, salvation is that the prophecy was spoken specifically over Jeremiah and, thus, does not apply to all babies ever born. While

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<sup>2</sup> See Thomas R. Schreiner, “What Happens to Babies When They Die?,” *Southern Equip*, accessed October 22, 2019, video, 6:21, <https://equip.sbts.edu/video/happens-babies-die/>.

<sup>3</sup> F. Delitzsch and C. F. Keil, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & II Samuel*, vol. 2 of *Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 393.

<sup>4</sup> Paul R. Williamson and D. A. Carson, *Death and the Afterlife: Biblical Perspectives on Ultimate Questions*, *New Studies in Biblical Theology* 44 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 41.

preachers may proclaim authoritatively that this was God’s will for Jeremiah and stand upon a direct application of Scripture when doing so, they commit a hermeneutical error when applying God’s will for unborn Jeremiah to all unborn babies for all-time.<sup>5</sup>

Abraham’s prayer in Genesis 18:25, however, gives a biblically rooted precedent for the hope that God adheres to the very sense of justice which he authored. God is consistent with his nature, and that nature is the very rubric by which Christians define justice itself. Believers call “good” and “fair” that which is so because it is consistent with God as he has revealed himself in Scripture. Christians may expect consistency in God. They may rightly observe the free confession from Romans 9:11 that unborn babies do not yet have the opportunity to do right or wrong: “For though her sons had not been born yet or done anything good or bad, so that God’s purpose according to election might stand . . . .” Then, standing on the presupposition that God would act consistently with the very nature of justice over which he is the Arbiter, believers may comfort bereaved parents with the biblical precedent of Abraham’s prayer from Genesis 18:25b: “Won’t the Judge of the whole earth do what is just?”

Few theological questions have the potential to foment passionate debate among pastors as this question concerning the biblical basis for the belief that babies who die go to heaven. It can be difficult to answer the question objectively because one has such a potent desire to answer the question on unambiguously biblical grounds and with that answer, assuage the mother by the fresh graveside as her body is wracked with sobs. It sharply tests one’s devotion to biblical orthodoxy, and it procures from a panel of seven doctrinally sound pastors seven different answers with seven distinct, nuanced inferences based loosely on the Bible. This project was an attempt to give biblical hope, and such

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<sup>5</sup> See Dwayne Mercer’s sermon at First Baptist Oviedo, now CrossLife Church, on June 1, 2014, beginning at 8:33 in video. Dwayne Mercer, “‘Making Your Life Count’ – Jeremiah 1:4–10,” CrossLife Church, June 4, 2014, YouTube video, 41:03, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M7jr2MSvcYc>.

hope comes from a passage that is not frequently understood through this particular interpretive lens.

In Matthew 18, Jesus teaches on God’s heart toward his children by taking a tiny boy into his arms and making the profound statements in verse 4 (“Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child—this one is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”) and verse 14 (“In the same way, it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones perish.”). He then goes on to say, “Leave the children alone, and don’t try to keep them from coming to me, because the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these” (Matt 19:14). These statements on children stop short of giving fully authoritative and conclusive scriptural proof that babies go to heaven when they die because they include the words “like” and “such as,” respectively. However, they bear a unique position in the complete teachings of Jesus. While Jesus uses the terms “like” and “as” in his parables, this teaching technique would be more akin to an object lesson.

The term translated “boy” in Matthew 18:14 is the Greek *παιδίον*, which Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich define as a little child, or even an infant, in this usage.<sup>6</sup> The original lookers-on to Jesus’s teachings would have known the context. Jesus’s disciples ask which of them would be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven (Matt 18:1). Their thinking on the nature of heaven is paradigmatically inverted by Jesus’s teaching with this small boy. Anticipating an experience in heaven that was purely meritocratic and hierarchical, they are competitive with one another. Their audacity in asking the question reveals their profound ignorance of heaven. In God’s sovereignty, this boy is present for the sake of this teaching.

Jesus’s use of parables is a fulfillment of the prophecy in Psalm 78:2. His parables were clear to anyone who had spiritual ears to hear his spiritual teachings. Those

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<sup>6</sup> Frederick William Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 749.

who did not have spiritual ears simply heard innocuous inanities about the scattering of seeds to differing types of soils. However, this teaching is different. The object of the object lesson is no object at all. The “object” is in fact a boy. This child represents all of God’s children—the church, Israel, modern believers, and children.

### **The Exegetical Foundations for the Project**

The arrangement of the project’s paradigmatic Scripture passages into an order other than chronological or canonical flowed from a systematic theology of a pastoral approach. The Bible’s words of hope and comfort must be reiterated throughout, the question “Why?” must be biblically addressed, and the questions of eternal life as well as the remainder of life on earth must be addressed. Hence, Psalm 34:18–20 recurred in each session and the focal passages of each session moved in an intentional order.

#### **Psalm 34:18–20**

Psalm 34:18–20 reads, “The Lord is near the brokenhearted; he saves those crushed in spirit. One who is righteous has many adversaries, but the Lord rescues him from them all. He protects all his bones; not one of them is broken.” This passage was recited in unison at the opening of each session. In its epochal context, it has a perfectly dual application. In its original intent, it expresses David’s stubborn resolution to praise God despite the scourge of Saul.<sup>7</sup> In the larger epoch, however, it points forward in redemptive history to Jesus on the cross.

These Spirit-inspired words made perfect sense to David as he sought refuge in Achish under the care of Abimelech, and they made equally perfect sense to John as he described Jesus on the cross in John 19:33–37.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, these words describe the

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<sup>7</sup> Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1–72: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries 14A (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 141.

<sup>8</sup> Joseph S. Exell and H. D. M. Spence, *The Psalms*, vol. 8 of *The Pulpit Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 254.

character of God and his intimately close proximity to bereaved parents in their brokenheartedness while simultaneously drawing those bereaved parents to Jesus, whose heart was broken on the cross. Rightly, as they believe and remember the gospel, these bereaved parents may take hope that they will be saved despite their crushed spirits. As the gospel is understood, Psalm 34:19 was rightly applied to the only Righteous One, Jesus, while it also provided a biblical depiction of the Lord as Rescuer. Though believers themselves are not righteous, Jesus is righteous; therefore, believers may share in his rescue. Finally, the language of broken bones in verse 20 drew an obvious parallel between this passage and the phrase repeated by the group in each meeting (“My legs weren’t broken by this. I stood up again, and now I’m here because I love my child. There is still life after this.”).

In the final meeting, this phrase was revised to reveal its ultimate purpose. Far from a mere emulation of secular psychological practices, it is a hermeneutic. It is a tool for parents to grasp that Psalm 34:18–20 has been about Jesus all along. The passage is not about them; it is about Jesus, whose saving work provides the only source of true healing for their pain. The final session’s version of this phrase was, thus, rendered, “Jesus’ legs weren’t broken by the crucifixion. Jesus stood up again, and now Jesus is here because He loves His children. There is still life after this life!”

**The gospel connection of Psalm 34:18–20.** In John 19:33–37, the prophetic nature of Psalm 34 is fulfilled by Jesus on the cross. Thus, connecting Psalm 34:18–20 to the gospel is profoundly appropriate. One must only show how John 19:33–37 quotes Psalm 34:20 directly, and the gospel will flow with the full force of the passage’s original intent.

When they came to Jesus, they did not break his legs since they saw that he was already dead. But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out. He who saw this has testified so that you also may believe. His testimony is true, and he knows he is telling the truth. For these things happened so that the Scripture would be fulfilled: **Not one of his bones will be broken.** Also,

another Scripture says: **They will look at the one they pierced.** (John 19:33–37)<sup>9</sup> The two sentences in bold in verses 36–37 come from the original formatting of the Christian Standard Bible to clarify that they are quotations from Old Testament passages—Psalm 34:20 and Zechariah 12:10, respectively. Zechariah 12:10 carries with it the same prophetic weight as Psalm 34:20, but it was not selected for the purposes of this curriculum for pastoral reasons. Zechariah’s original passage does not carry the secondary application of bringing comfort as Psalm 34:20 clearly does.

The curriculum’s content emphatically pointed out this fulfillment of Psalm 34 so that there may be no mistaking its intent. The alteration of the wording of the phrase repeated by the group became permanent so as to drive home this transition of the group’s understanding of Psalm 34 from its secondary application as words of comfort to its primary application as a foreshadowing of the gospel and a prophecy fulfilled on the cross.

### **Job 1:7–22 and 13:15**

Job 1:7–22 provides a glimpse into the metaphysical world that is not found in any other book of the Bible; recording a dialogue between Satan and God. Satan, deceiving and lying since the beginning, will do all that he can to remain unnoticed as he works within the parameters given him by God to wreak havoc on human lives. God is sovereign and ultimately in control, so it is reasonable that bereaved parents would seek to know why God would allow their child to die. However, it is important that bereaved parents also know that their family’s affliction may be attributed to Satan and his attacks.

Job 1:7–22 provides theological insight into the process bereaved parents are prevented from seeing. It provides a dialogue in which God endorses Job, Satan discredits Job in a challenge, and God grants Satan permission to attack all but Job and

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<sup>9</sup> Samuel Terrien, *Psalms, Proverbs*, vol. 4 of *The Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1955), 179–81.

then all but Job's own life.<sup>10</sup> It is possible that this dialogue describes the prompting behind all of Satan's attacks. Satan does not appear in the first two chapters and subsequently disappear from the narrative, but embodies the very evil with which the prose of Job is sparring throughout.<sup>11</sup> Thus, it must be included in a curriculum that seeks to explain to bereaved parents why their children were taken from them.

The opening verses of the chapter were omitted to avoid the questions that they will inevitably generate regarding the guilt of Job's children (the innocence of unborn babies was covered in the session founded upon John 9:1–3), as were the words "sons of God" in verse 6. These questions are theologically rich but outside the scope of what this curriculum hoped to accomplish. Given the limited time of each session, the scope of this project was better served to save such questions for a systematic theology curriculum.

Job's second testing, as recorded in the subsequent chapter, was not necessary to include in the curriculum, and it is also not the testing that involves the deaths of Job's children. Given that this curriculum focused on bereaved parents, it focused on the first testing of Job instead of the testing that includes Job's own physical affliction when Satan strikes him with incurable boils. Though Job's children were grown, bereaved parents of even infants and babies can immediately see their connection to Job because of what happens to his family in his first testing. This connection puts into perspective Satan's possible role in their children's deaths. God is sovereign, but Satan is responsible. The hackneyed colloquialisms "God will not give you more than you can handle" and "Everything happens for a reason" are commonly offered to parents after the deaths of their children. Almost never are rightful accusations made against Satan. Rather, he is often bizarrely absolved in the court of public thought. However, the opening of the

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas Robinson, *Job*, vol. 15 of *The Preacher's Homiletic Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), 13.

<sup>11</sup> Robert S. Fyall, *Now My Eyes Have Seen You: Images of Creation and Evil in the Book of Job*, *New Studies in Biblical Theology* 12 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 40.

chapter of Job provides biblical precedent for Satan exercising his given control over people (vv. 15, 17), lightning (v. 16), and wind (v. 19). No work of scriptural exegesis attempting to minister to bereaved parents and answer the pervading question of “Why?” can rightfully exclude this passage that directly attributes the deaths of a godly man’s children to Satan’s own work within the parameters set by God.

After providing a summary of what transpires across the subsequent chapters, the curriculum pointed to Job 13:15. Here, Job proclaims steadfastly that he would continue to place his hope in God even if God were to slay him. The segue to this passage flows naturally from the final verse of chapter 1: “Throughout all this Job did not sin or blame God for anything” (v. 22). So, the biblical example was given to bereaved parents of another bereaved parent in the Bible refusing to use bereavement as a license to sin against God and accuse him of wrongdoing.<sup>12</sup> No effrontery to the holiness of God can be justified, regardless of how pained the heart may be. This aspect of the text was pointed out to bereaved parents to protect them from committing such a sin or to call them to repent from such sin that they may have already committed in the pangs of their deep grief. Applying Job’s example, they must strive until they can proclaim their trust in God despite the pain.<sup>13</sup>

**The gospel connection of the Job passages.** It is possible that Job’s story is a prototype for all demonic attacks, including those resulting in the deaths of innocent children. While this curriculum maintained the scriptural possibility that some bereaved parents may have come under judgement in the manner that David and Bathsheba were judged, such is not the case in the whole of child mortalities. Furthermore, while this

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<sup>12</sup> Francis I. Andersen, *Job: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries 13 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1976), 94.

<sup>13</sup> Timothy Keller, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2013), 321.

curriculum maintained that some children may have been prenatally afflicted to display the works of God (John 9:1–3), it is possible that some bereaved parents lost their children simply because of Satan’s attacks. Job’s children died as a result of Satan’s permitted attack.

The presence and reality of evil in this world are obvious to a bereaved parent. So, the need for the Savior is self-evident. The tendency of a bereaved parent will be to accuse their very Savior of wrongdoing, thereby pushing them farther from the gospel. Thus, Job’s exemplary refusal to accuse God of wrongdoing was put before bereaved parents as the biblical standard. The hope was that bereaved parents whose hearts are hardened would see themselves reflected in Job’s circumstances and be convicted by the Holy Spirit to refuse the temptation to absolve Satan of any wrongdoing as well as refuse the temptation to accuse God of wrongdoing. With emphatic repetition, the book of Job demonstrates that God is unassailable in his holiness regardless of one’s agonies.<sup>14</sup> In fact, Job’s own wife is clearly viewed as in the wrong when she encourages Job to curse God and die (Job 2:9). In the subsequent verse, she receives the potent response, “‘You speak as a foolish woman speaks,’ [Job] told her. ‘Should we accept only good from God and not adversity?’ Throughout all this Job did not sin in what he said” (v. 10).

Job’s children did not suffer this fate as recompense for their revelry as recorded in Job 1:18–19. Rather, this was a testing of Job’s faith and that same testing may be placed squarely before bereaved parents. 2 Samuel 12:1–25 shared the biblical precedent for God allowing a child to die in judgement for parental sin. So, that grave truth was presented in this curriculum, but it was presented third in the sequence of sessions addressing the question “Why did my child die?” Furthermore, it was in the interest of biblical accuracy that Job’s implied guilt was soundly downplayed in this

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<sup>14</sup> F. Delitzsch and C. F. Keil, *Job*, vol. 4 of *Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 209–16.

session.

Job had divine revelation to confirm in his heart that he bore no culpability in his children's deaths, but modern bereaved parents may not have such certainty. Parents of deceased children are likely to struggle with guilt and pine for a chance to go back in time to do something differently even if they did nothing to precipitate it. So, parents whose actions directly or even indirectly led to their children's deaths will certainly struggle with crushing guilt. As these parents relive the event or events in their minds, they are tormented with the futile desire to re-enter the past and alter the course of history.

The agonizing accusatory voices in the bereaved parent's mind are modern iterations of Job's friends who plead with him to consider his own complicity in the deaths of his children and his other calamities. God soundly rebuked Job's friends, and it was the aim of the curriculum that God's Word would rebuke the satanic thoughts of bereaved parents whose futile sense of guilt drives them to needless despair, bitterness, and possible suicide. God rebuked the ignorant accusations of Job's friends, and the resulting text is nothing short of spectacular. Job 38 begins with this colossal rebuke spoken by God:

Then the LORD answered Job from the whirlwind. He said: Who is this who obscures my counsel with ignorant words? Get ready to answer me like a man; when I question you, you will inform me. Where were you when I established the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who fixed its dimensions? Certainly you know! Who stretched a measuring line across it? What supports its foundations? Or who laid its cornerstone while the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy? (Job 38:1–7)

Job's restoration beyond what he had in an earthly sense is a foreshadowing of the true restoration Christians have waiting on them in heaven. Thus, Job 1:7–22 and 13:15 were taught within the larger context of Job and used to show a picture of the gospel. Job's experience is a microcosm of the current human experience in a sin-stained and demonically riddled world. There is a day coming wherein God will make all things new. There is a day coming wherein God will cast Death and Hades into a lake of fire

(Rev 20:14). One day, death will be no more (Rev 21:4). The current sad state of things wherein people are afflicted like Job will give way to a new heaven and a new earth (Rev 21:1). With these oppressive demons forever obliterated, Christians will be forever restored in a manner eternally beyond Job's earthly restoration. The story of Job points the hearts of bereaved parents heavenward. Only the gospel may give such hope.

### **John 9:1–3**

Eighty percent of married couples who lose children see their marriages end in divorce.<sup>15</sup> This high divorce rate is likely connected to the feelings of guilt wrought by demonic deception both in the heart of the accused spouse and the heart of the unforgiving spouse. Even in cases wherein a parent does indeed bear a degree of responsibility, there ought to be forgiveness and grace between husband and wife. Especially in the case of Christian couples, there must be forgiveness between husband and wife as marriages are pictures of Christ and the church. Just as there is forgiveness between Christ and the church, so must there also be forgiveness between husbands and wives. Since Christians have been forgiven everything, they must forgive everything.

Heartbreakingly, even in cases wherein there is no clear culpability on the part of either parent, unjust blame may be assigned, bringing with it a particularly jagged brand of bitterness between husband and wife. Not only must the unjustly blamed spouse face the anguish of child loss but also the agony of a horrendous false accusation from his or her beloved as well, thus compounding the agony.

When the Holy Spirit is not present to give supernatural peace and assurance of one's forgiveness of sin, the pain of child loss and the pain of related guilt is entirely too much for most marriages to bear and often too much for a healthy psyche to carry. So, couples who do not have the Holy Spirit acting as their mediator have little hope of

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<sup>15</sup> Catherine H. Rogers et al., "Long-Term Effects of the Death of a Child on Parents' Adjustment in Midlife," *Journal of Family Psychology* 22 (April 2008): 203–11.

seeing their marriages survive their bereavement. The gospel is the only hope for their marriage and for their souls.

John 9:1–3 presents a beautiful biblical hope for bereaved parents who are also stricken with guilt over their child’s affliction. In it, Jesus speaks directly to the question of parental culpability when his disciples ask about the man born blind: “As he was passing by, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him: ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned,’ Jesus answered. ‘This came about so that God’s works might be displayed in him.’” Directly from Jesus comes an answer to the question “Why?” when he is asked regarding a child born afflicted.<sup>16</sup> A baby afflicted with blindness as in the original scriptural context is a strong parallel to a baby afflicted with lethal ailments in today’s context. So, though the modern-day recipients’ child may have been born with something other than blindness, something more lethal, they may be able to apply Jesus’s answer to their own question “Why?” Why were some of those children represented in the group born with a debilitating affliction that led to their deaths? For a percentage of them, it was so that God’s works might be displayed through them. This is evidenced by the ways in which God uses testimonies of child loss as catalysts by which the gospel may be shared. God has used my own son Aiden’s story to lead over 150 people to faith in Christ as of 2018. After careful and brutal introspection, being fully open to the possibility that Aiden’s death was precipitated by God’s judgment for our sin, my wife and I observed the fruit of his testimony and came to this conclusion thusly.

**The gospel presented in John 9:1–3.** There are beautiful parallels between the parents in the text and God the Father as well as parallels between the afflicted son and God the Son. In John 9:3, Jesus states that though the parents were surely not sinless

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<sup>16</sup> Arno C. Gaebelin, *The Gospel of John: An Exposition* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux, 1982), 168–70.

themselves, they committed no sins that were correlated to their son's condition. God the Father is light, and there is no sin or darkness in him (1 John 1:5). Further, Jesus clarifies in verse 3 that the man himself, though surely a sinner in other holistic regards, committed no sin that served as the impetus for God to afflict him with blindness. Jesus the Son committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth (1 Pet 2:22). So, the parallels between the earthly parents and the heavenly Father, as well as between the earthly son and the heavenly Son, are apparent. The works of God certainly were displayed through Jesus upon the cross and through his resurrection. They are also displayed through the man born blind just as Jesus explains in John 9:1–3. Through no fault of his own, this man bore the affliction of blindness so that God's works would be displayed through him, and the event would be catalogued in Scripture for generations to read and hear. Likewise, through no fault of his own, Jesus bore the affliction of the cross so that the works of the devil would be destroyed (1 John 3:8), and the event would be catalogued in Scripture for generations to read and hear. This man's story provides a beautiful foreshadowing of the coming gospel story—a microcosm of the approaching passion and a picture of God's glory through affliction for bereaved parents.

## **2 Samuel 12:1–25**

This passage recounts the confrontational boldness and righteous cunning of the prophet Nathan as he tells King David precisely why the son born to him by his new wife, Bathsheba, would die. It then recounts the brutal story of David's pleading and grievous fasting in vain, followed by the child's death, David's recovery, and the subsequent birth of Bathsheba's next son, Jedidiah.

More so than any other passage in the Bible, 2 Samuel 12:1–25 requires a high degree of emotional intelligence when used to shepherd bereaved parents. However, it is also the Bible passage most directly applicable to bereavement ministry, especially in the context of infant loss. Not only is such a ministerial endeavor worth its inherent risk of

offense, but there is arguably an ethical obligation to make this passage known when ministering to bereaved parents. Should a bereaved parent attend the teaching of a curriculum designed to minister specifically to them only to learn of 2 Samuel 12 *later*, the results would likely be a loss of trust in the pastorate and the onslaught of a new emotional wave for which the bereaved parent has not been prepared. The enemy may remove the passage from the context of David's life and, just as he did in Matthew 4, contort the Bible and fashion it into a spiritual snare. Thus, it is appropriate and altogether called for that this passage was included in this curriculum.

This is the third and most difficult answer to the pressing question "Why did my child die?" In the case of David and Bathsheba, their child died because of sin. This curriculum would be remiss if it elided this biblical precedent. So, it was presented in a way that allowed hearts to be convicted by the Spirit and then immediately hear the gospel.

**The gospel connection of 2 Samuel 12:1–25.** The common practice of gospel presentations is to invite people to *accept* Christ as Savior rather than to *confess* that Jesus is Lord (Rom 10:9). The grace of salvation is emphasized in a way that portends a lack of wrath from God in any fashion. Such grace presents a milksop god who allows sin to go utterly unpunished, like a corrupt judge who allows all criminals to go free. This curriculum, however, began the gospel presentation with God's righteous wrath toward precisely such sins as our own. Then, with God's righteous wrath established, his extravagant grace was explained.

Just as there are gospel foreshadowings in the deaths of the firstborn sons of Egypt in Exodus 12, so also is there a gospel foreshadowing in the death of David and Bathsheba's son in 2 Samuel 12. It was for sin that David's son died.

The gospel connection from this passage confronted the fallacious thinking of embittered bereaved Christians. It is altogether understandable from a fallen perspective

that even Christians, or especially Christians, would grow bitter toward God when their children die. This thinking, however, is fallacious. It presupposes that Christians deserve only good things from God, that God owes Christians, when the opposite is true. Romans 6:23 reminds Christians that what they actually deserve is eternal death for their sin, but what they receive from God instead is eternal life. Christians have been saved from the rightful wages of their sins! They will enjoy eternal life with God forevermore! They should be eternally grateful no matter what God allows to befall them in the course of this life, and that includes the unthinkable death of a child. God owes bereaved parents no explanation, but bereaved parents will step into eternal peace when they enter Christ's presence forever. The session from Job reminded Christians that they should be willing to receive suffering from God in addition to good things. The session from Ruth showed them the way God drew Naomi from her bitterness to redemption. This session reminded them that God judges sin, but they have been delivered even amid their bereavement. The bereaved parent's hope lies in heaven where, though we may not know all things, we will know peace.<sup>17</sup>

### **Matthew 18:10–14**

In the modern context, the most popular application of this passage is its use as the basis for pursuing wayward Christians who have been out of fellowship in their local church for an extended season. Pastors rightly interpret their role as parallel to that of the shepherd named in Jesus's parable, but there is actually much more to this text. In the opening of Matthew 18, Jesus brings a child before those to whom he speaks. That child becomes the living subject of a living lesson. This is the only time in Jesus's recorded teaching ministry that Jesus uses a human as the core illustration and embodiment of a teaching. The Spirit gave some ears to grasp Jesus's parables, while others, though

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<sup>17</sup> Alan W. Gomes, *40 Questions about Heaven and Hell* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2018), 221.

hearing physically, could not understand spiritually. Jesus taught things that were connected to the actions and words of living people, such as the widow and her mite or the centurion and his faith, but this parable is the only time Jesus points to a person as the direct manifestation of a given teaching. He used object lessons such as the vine and branches, but Matthew 18 is different. Were someone to interpret his parable language as literal, the result would be innocuous: Jesus was not literally a vine, and his disciples were not literally branches. These truths were obvious. However, taking the teaching of Matthew 18 literally would have an entirely different effect. It was not an object lesson. It was not a parable. It was teaching of a unique sort. A living and breathing child imbued with the image of God is taken as the clear subject of Jesus's teaching, the only such occurrence in Scripture. This child, in addition to representing God's heart toward Israel and all of his spiritual children in the church, quite simply represents children. Israel and the church are secondary. Those most directly represented by the child are simply children. This is the simplest and most obvious interpretation, and it works harmoniously with classic interpretations involving Israel and the church. For this reason, the modern pastor is correct when he recites the inner two verses of verses 10–14 (the omission of v. 11 is addressed in this passage's sermon) and applies them to the wayward church member who is to be sought after by the ministry: "What do you think? If someone has a hundred sheep, and one of them goes astray, won't he leave the ninety-nine on the hillside and go and search for the stray? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over that sheep more than over the ninety-nine that did not go astray" (Matt 18:12–13).

This couplet of verses is so commonly applied to the homecomings of prodigal Christians that is a classic colloquialism in modern church history. However, a survey of most Christians who use it this way would likely reveal surprise when it is shown that this verse is immediately preceded and followed by verses describing God's heart toward children. The immediately preceding verse reads, "See to it that you don't despise one of these little ones, because I tell you that in heaven their angels continually view the face of

my Father in heaven” (v. 10). The verse immediately following reads, “In the same way, it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones perish” (v. 14).” This couplet of verses is, in the most obvious form of context (i.e., the verse before and the verse after), about children. The specific use of the word *παιδίον* in the fifth verse distinguishes this Matthew 18 teaching from 1 Timothy 2:4, wherein Paul says that God “wants everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” While 1 Timothy 2:4 uses Greek referring to the whole human race, Matthew 18 uses Greek referring specifically to children. It is possible that Jesus was giving hope for the salvation of all little ones when he said, while holding a child, “In the same way, it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones perish” (Matt 18:14).

Let not the apparent novelty of this interpretation be misinterpreted as hubris. Rather, it is to be considered in light of the humility with which it is offered. John A. Broadus, Ulrich Luz, W. D. Davies, and Dale C. Allison have all produced masterful works on Matthew,<sup>18</sup> but none has offered the possibility that Jesus’s use of a child in this teaching gives hope for child salvation.<sup>19</sup>

**The gospel presented in Matthew 18.** After building the case for hope that their late children are in heaven, the curriculum offered bereaved parents the gospel and a chance to demonstrate a response to the Spirit’s drawing on their hearts—the opportunity to confess that Jesus is Lord. If their children are in heaven, it is solely by the gospel that they will have the chance to see their children again. Jesus has articulated precisely his heart toward his children. Observing this fact, the truth of John 1:12–13 was extended so that parents might likewise become children of God: “But to all who did receive

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<sup>18</sup> See John A. Broadus, *Commentary on Matthew* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1886); Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8–20*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001); W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *Matthew: A Shorter Commentary*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1866).

<sup>19</sup> The original Greek text consulted was the 28th ed. of the Nestle-Aland text *Novum Testamentum Graece* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2012).

him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.”

Great caution and care were taken at this juncture. The hope was not to manipulate bereaved parents by pouncing on the single most emotionally charged idea that they will experience in their human lives—the opportunity to be reunited with their physically lost children. Rather, the hope was that the Holy Spirit would use this moment to draw upon the hardened hearts of bereaved parents where necessary. The intention was to point out an eternal truth: lost parents have absolutely no hope of seeing their children again, but saved parents do have such hope. Being scriptural necessarily means being honest, and being honest with bereaved parents means sharing this truth. However, sharing this truth calls for great care.

There could be nothing more emotionally compelling for a bereaved parent than the power of this truth, and so this power should be wielded in a way that is scripturally sound so that it does not lead to false conversion experiences rooted in grief. The desire to see one’s child again is not salvific. A bereaved parent could long passionately to see her child again, indicate a response amid an emotional fervor, and still spend eternity in hell because she never knew Jesus as Lord. Romans 10:9 provides a clear biblical standard for salvation. If she confesses with her mouth that Jesus is Lord and believes in her heart that God raised him from the dead, then she will be saved. It is this biblical standard that delineates salvation from false conversion, and it does not bend to accommodate the grief stricken. The gospel gives hope to bereaved parents, but the false gospel rips it away. Emotionalism may beguile the bereaved unto a state of assuaged damnation and guarantee that parent and child are never reconciled. Thus, this gospel hope ought to be shared with bereaved parents with Jesus’s lordship as primary and reconciliation with the lost child as secondary. It is possible that some parents may feel compelled to falsely declare that Jesus is Lord when they actually do not know him simply out of the hope that it may grant them the chance to see their children again. It is

simultaneously possible that some bereaved parents may be so mired in bitterness and heart-hardening grief that only an instrument as pointed as Matthew 18's heavenly hope for their children may break them free from spiritual bondage.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the risk must be taken, and the balance must be struck. The practical issues pertaining to this aspect of the curriculum and its delivery were explored further in a subsequent chapter.

## **2 Corinthians 4:16–5:10**

The grief of the Christian is temporary, but the grief of the damned is eternal. However, even Christians may let temporal grief overtake eternal salvation in their priorities. This tendency is even more pronounced in those unacquainted with God's grace. Satan will anesthetize the yet-believer with this world's frivolities. He will place before the lost person's eyes some puny thing which, simply because of its immediate proximity, appears through the distorted perspective to be bigger than matters of heaven or hell. The grief of the bereaved parent feels as though it will last forever, but for the Christian, this is an illusion.

Because of the resurrection of Jesus, the believing bereaved parent may know that even this all-eclipsing grief will pass. Because of the resurrection of Jesus, the non-believing bereaved parent may yet know Christ and in him find hope for healing not only from grief but also from sin forevermore. Paul's writings in 2 Corinthians 4–5, then, were shared with bereaved parents. Paul explores the ways in which the sin-stricken world awaits its redemption and emphasizes how human souls find themselves in that same tension—eternal beings in awkward temporary tents.<sup>21</sup> By inspiring Paul to write these passages of Scripture, God plunged his arm deep into our mire, lifted our chins, and gave

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<sup>20</sup> John Monro Gibson, *The Expositor's Bible: The Gospel of St. Matthew* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2017), 253–54.

<sup>21</sup> Margaret E. Thrall, *I and II Corinthians*, Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 146–47.

our afflicted souls a glimpse of eternity:

Therefore we do not give up. Even though our outer person is being destroyed, our inner person is being renewed day by day. For our momentary light affliction is producing for us an absolutely incomparable eternal weight of glory. So we do not focus on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. (2 Cor 4:16–18)

Paul’s own deep afflictions make this text even more relatable and applicable to the bereaved parent. He does not write from a state of innocuous privilege, exempt from pain as he writes to suffering people about pain. Rather, in 2 Corinthians 11:16–33, he catalogs his sufferings, and the scope is overwhelming. Even if Paul had written these words from the safety of an ivory tower, anything inspired by the Holy Spirit is still absolutely authoritative and true. God could have inspired it through such an unsoiled instrument as the insulated scholar, but he instead chose the bedraggled apostle and the result is a more accessible and triumphant message. This anthem is sung by one in the trenches of pain alongside his readers.<sup>22</sup>

Sovereign God is under no obligation to make his text more accessible, but he has. He elected imperfect humans as the lenses through whom he inspired his perfect Word. Flawed human authors were the instruments of a flawless Spirit, and now those who would accuse the Bible of being irrelevant to the suffering are disarmed. It was inspired through the suffering! Hence, the opening words of this passage read, “Therefore we do not give up.” In the penultimate verses before the selected passage, Paul describes it:

Now we have this treasure in clay jars, so that this extraordinary power may be from God and not from us. We are afflicted in every way but not crushed; we are perplexed but not in despair; we are persecuted but not abandoned; we are struck down but not destroyed. We always carry the death of Jesus in our body, so that the life of Jesus may also be displayed in our body. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus’s sake, so that Jesus’s life may also be displayed in our mortal flesh. So then, death is at work in us, but life in you. And since we have the same spirit of faith in keeping with what is written, **I believed, therefore I spoke,**

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<sup>22</sup> Paul Barnett, *The Message of 2 Corinthians: Power in Weakness*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 95.

we also believe, and therefore speak. For we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you. Indeed, everything is for your benefit so that, as grace extends through more and more people, it may cause thanksgiving to increase to the glory of God. (2 Cor 4:7–15; bold is original)

The persecution of Paul gave him rapport with his original readers. That rapport was not necessary; nevertheless, God established it with the finite minds of his readers. A simple “Thus spake the Lord” would suffice, but God extends further grace. That same rapport now grants some further degree of accessibility unto this text for bereaved parents.

Some bereaved parents may have completely misconstrued their grief and, therefore, must have their chins lifted toward eternity by this text. Those whose loss has left them blind to nothing other than their grief must be shown where their grief actually stands in comparison to eternity. Those whose pain has left them idle must be shown ways in which they are actually equipped with the opportunity to emulate Paul. In the same way that Paul’s afflictions only added to his ministry, there are many Christian bereaved parents whose loss will actually be the impetus for their most significant impact. This is a difficult threshold for some parents to cross, but it is critical.

Not only may God reach several hurting people through these bereaved parents, but the parents themselves may experience their greatest healing through the ministry that comes from their pain. Even in the secular context, bereaved parents do this. If a child dies in a creek, the child’s parents will campaign to have sufficient warning signage posted by said creek. If a child dies consuming a product, the child’s parents will campaign to have sufficient warning labels placed on the product. If a child dies due to a defect in the design of a vehicle, the child’s parents will campaign to have the vehicle discontinued and the manufacturer duly penalized for negligence. Parents do this, in part, out of guilt; they were not passionate about these issues, or even aware of these issues before the deaths of their children. They cannot bear the thought of their own involvement in their child’s death, and so they wish to ascribe a degree of blame to an outside force or object and absolve themselves publicly. They find a new sense of

purpose in making war against that which took their child. They hope to spare other parents their pain. So, they blame the creek, outlaw the product, and take down the automobile company. While there is some merit to these actions, and many of these campaigns of bereaved activist-parents have historically led to life-saving change, many of these campaigns are ultimately futile, and none of them will bring real healing to the aching heart of the fiery-eyed activist behind them. Only the gospel can do that.

Second Corinthians 4:16–5:10 redirects the grief of the bereaved parent toward a ministry that is eternally significant, righteously justified, absolutely effective, and will actually bring some modicum of healing to their hearts.<sup>23</sup> While it is obviously good to simultaneously take measures to save the lives of future children, those products boycotted, companies protested, and locations demolished were all temporary. The gospel stands forever. So, their efforts to affect the temporal world are of some value, but the ways in which their stories touch other people with the gospel of Jesus Christ resonate eternally. “What is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal” (2 Cor 4:18). The non-Christian mother of a dead child who successfully bankrupts the company whose product caused her child to choke may have accomplished precisely what she set out to do in honor of her child’s death; but, her success is still only temporary, her grief is still crippling, and her soul is still lost. In stark contrast is the activism of the bereaved parent who is a Christian. The bereaved Christian parent strives to minister through his or her pain. The bereaved Christian parent ministers *because* of his or her pain. Then, as fruit is born from such ministries, healing is brought to the heart of the minister, and that tortuous question “Why did my child die?” grows strangely dim in light of the glory and grace of God as new believers are born through this grief-stricken testimony.

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<sup>23</sup> William Barclay, *The Letters to the Corinthians*, Daily Study Bible Series (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 201–202.

**The gospel foundation of 2 Corinthians 4 and 5.** Paul's message in 2

Corinthians 5:6 ("So we are always confident and know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord") applies only to Christians. This beautiful hope is enticing, and the Holy Spirit may use it to draw upon the grieving hearts of bereaved parents to show them the one eternal deliverance they may find, primarily, from their sin and, as a side effect, their grief as well.

In John 3:36, John confirms that these bereaved parents are under God's wrath by default: "The one who believe in the Son has eternal life, but the one who rejects the Son will not see life; instead, the wrath of God remains on him." Born into sin nature, parents and non-parents alike share this same basic need for the gospel. The clear reference to Jesus as "Lord" indicates to the reader the need to confess that he is Lord. The entire teaching is based upon belief in Jesus's resurrection from the dead. This passage is confirmation to the Christian and incentive to the lost.

**Ruth 1:1–5, 19–22; 4:9–22**

The first five verses of the book of Ruth concisely tell the story of how Naomi came to be a widow. This introductory passage encapsulates the terminal journey of Elimelech, Mahlon, and Chilion and the timely sojourn of Naomi to Moab. Bereaved parents likely saw their reflections in Naomi's loss of her two sons. The next portion of Ruth's first chapter (vv. 19–22) tells of Naomi's return home to Bethlehem and how her former neighbors no longer recognize her for the bitterness that has come to define and even name her. This transformation likely resonated with bereaved parents who may have lost their former identities in their grief. The final selected portion of Ruth (4:9–22) tells the story of Boaz acting as the family redeemer to Ruth and, by extension, Naomi. Closing this passage, and the Book of Ruth as a whole, is the genealogy which Matthew repeats in his Gospel's opening genealogy, which leads to Jesus.

Bereaved parents were told about their sister-in-suffering Naomi. She is one of

the few bereaved parents in the Bible who is given an ample allotment of text spanning more than one chapter. Ultimately, her grief and pain tell the gospel story. Through the Torah's establishment of levirate marriage and because of Ruth's devotion, Naomi's story becomes Jesus's backstory.

Ruth's story fulfills Old Testament commands and foreshadows New Testament realities. Levirate marriage was established in Deuteronomy 25:5–10, and the practice of leaving grain behind for the alien is established in Leviticus 19:9–10 and 23:22. Both of these passages make the story of Ruth possible, and the story of Ruth itself makes the genealogy at the opening of Matthew possible. However, the prophetic implications of Ruth transcend even the modern redemptive era and point further forward to the ultimate Family Redeemer believers have in Jesus. In Revelation 5, Jesus steps forward to take the scroll because he is worthy, because of his blood, and because he has paid the full price of sin. Boaz stepped forward before the elders at the city gate to redeem the distressed bride Ruth and her bereft mother-in-law Naomi. In this action, Boaz foreshadowed Christ,<sup>24</sup> though Boaz, like the patriarchs and prophets, was less than Christ. However, in accordance with the concept put forth by Paul in Romans 5 regarding Adam, there are “types of Christ” in the Old Testament. Bereaved parents may be part of the redeemed bride of Christ—the church redeemed by the Redeemer—if they believe in Jesus. Their ability to relate to the original context because of the deaths of their children provides a clear hermeneutic by which the Book of Ruth may connect more readily with bereaved parents than with average congregants. Ruth and Naomi needed a redeemer. Modern people need the Redeemer. The original Hebrew term for “family redeemer” used in Ruth is *גֹּאֵל* (*goelle*). The KJV renders this term “nearest kinsman,” the ESV renders it simply “redeemer,” the NIV renders it “guardian-redeemer,” and the CSB renders it “family redeemer.” Each translation rings true to the original intent of the

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<sup>24</sup> Charles E. Fuller, *Ruth: A Life of Love and Loyalty* (London: Fleming H. Revell, 2009), 102.

Hebrew **לָגַל**, which means “to redeem” or “to act as kinsman.”<sup>25</sup>

**The gospel fulfillment of Ruth in Matthew 1:1, 5–6, 16.** The connection from an Old Testament passage to a New Testament passage could not be more direct than it is in this case: the Old Testament text is quoted directly in the New Testament passage. Matthew 1:5–6 reiterates the closing words of the Book of Ruth. So, not only does the text of Ruth point bereaved parents to the gospel through the picture of how Boaz redeemed, but also it quite literally points forward to a Gospel—the Gospel of Matthew, that is. Even seemingly loose and ethereal bridges between Old and New testament passages can be used by the Spirit to achieve powerful change in people’s hearts. A direction quotation between books of the Bible, then, is even harder to refute. The classic refutation of cross-references between Bible books as “circular reasoning” may fall short with a brief reference to the vast historical records of the Torah and how it is thoroughly established that Ruth and Matthew are different books with different ages. Further, these two genealogies are, in themselves, attestations as to the historicity of ancient Hebrew texts. Matthew wrote most directly to Jews, and this common practice of providing a physical lineage that tied one directly to a physical allotment of the Promised Land was a device used to establish rapport with the reader. Thus, Ruth codifies the link of Boaz to David. Thus, Matthew’s Gospel codifies the link of Abraham to Jesus, stopping to name Boaz and David en route.<sup>26</sup> The bereaved parent whose heart is hardened by grief may see this deliberately brief establishment of the credibility of the Bible and be open to the ways in which this gospel truth has direct bearing on him or her today.

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<sup>25</sup> Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The New Brown, Driver, and Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 145.

<sup>26</sup> John MacArthur, *Matthew 1–7, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1985), 3.

While Boaz acted as family redeemer in a literal sense, Jesus acts as our Redeemer in an eschatological sense. If the scroll with writing on both sides in Revelation 5 is to be interpreted as the title deed to fallen creation, then Jesus's seizing of the scroll is to be interpreted as the ultimate act of *goelle* redemption, and humanity is the distressed bride whose life is saved. Jesus is the greater and truer Boaz.

As God worked through the bereaved widows trekking their way north from Moab, across the Jordan River, and southwest into Bethlehem, the onlooker would have witnessed quite a bleak scene.<sup>27</sup> However, said onlooker would have been watching the backstory to the greatest miracle in the history of the universe—salvation for all who believe in Jesus as Lord. The tear-soaked, downward-turned face of the bereaved parent may appear bleak. However, that same gospel power may be at work in her heart if she sees how God has worked His most beautiful miracle through people like her. Better than most, she is able to appreciate the beautiful redemption of Naomi. She may, because of her dead child, become Naomi's eternal sister, not in bereavement but in Jesus.

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<sup>27</sup> Jesse Lyman Hurlbut, *A Bible Atlas: A Manual of Biblical Geography and History Especially Prepared for the Use of Teachers and Students* (New York: Rand McNally, 1948), 48.

CHAPTER 3  
THEORETICAL, PRACTICAL, AND HISTORICAL  
ISSUES RELATED TO BEREAVEMENT  
MINISTRY

Only the gospel of Jesus Christ can give any modicum of healing to the bereaved parent's heart. There was an era in which the church held a monopoly on ministering to the bereaved, but that influence has faded behind secular and clinical means built on nihilistic presuppositions. These toxic resources offer hopelessness and have temporarily crowded out biblical resources. However, robust treatment options are on the horizon, and they come in the form of promising Bible studies. Biblical resources have lost none of their potency, and technological advancements promise new avenues for the truth to reach the bereaved. Hope springs forth.

**The Bereavement Views and Pastoral  
Practices of the Reformers**

The Protestant church's acquiescence to the softening of *sola Scriptura*, the loss of Puritan rigor, the rise of pragmatism and topical teaching in churches, and the simple passage of time have so dimmed the significance of the Reformation in Christians' minds that it has been forgotten. While the soteriologies of John Calvin and Martin Luther have been preserved and extolled in seminaries, their commendable discipline as shepherds of God's flock have been underappreciated. The corporate underestimation of the Holy Spirit's role in salvation has led to the church's attempt to ingratiate with the lost world, and this has deflated ecclesial bereavement ministry.

**The Voice of Biblical Candor**

Lost is the righteously confrontational tone of the pastor. An ecclesial model

that capitulates to the non-believer and compromises doctrine as a stratagem to grow numerically has robbed the pastoral voice of its candor. The Reformers, however, held fast to Scripture and spoke accordingly. Consider an example from a small sample of John Calvin's immense writings. Upon confronting François d'Andelot de Coligny for his sin, John Calvin spared not the sinner's feelings:

I have no doubt but what I tell you will at first sight appear harsh to you, but I will say with St Paul, that I shall not repent of having afflicted you, provided it be for your salvation. Nay, if you desire to be spared of God, it is good and salutary for you not to be spared of those to whom he has given in charge to bring you to repentance. For since those who seek to absolve themselves are the most severely condemned by him, he shows you singular favour in chiding you by his word, in order to render you your own judge.<sup>1</sup>

The loss of the pastor's biblical candor since the fading of the Reformers' age contributed to the corporate church's confusion on the matter of infant salvation. A storied legacy of church generations upon church generations who traditionally acquiesce to politeness eventually led to an embargo on acknowledging the possibility that infants may not be guaranteed salvation. So, stripped of his ability to speak truth with love, the modern pastor soothes the bereaved mother with euphemisms and colloquialisms.

With the death of the pastor's voice of biblical candor came the pall of awkwardness over discussions of death itself from the pulpit. Gone are sermons on death. Pastors do not speak about death until the dying have already died and it is too late. Calvin, however, spoke passionately on death: "Would that I might attain to that discipline in contempt of this present life, and in the mediation of a holy death, as the experience of the past year, in the deaths of many pious persons, may well have brought me."<sup>2</sup> Modern bereavement ministry on the whole would do well to revive the pastoral voice of biblical candor akin to Calvin's. Platitudes fall impotent, but a pastoral voice

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<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Letters of John Calvin: Selected from the Bonnet Edition with an Introductory Biographical Sketch* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1855), 197.

<sup>2</sup> Calvin, *Letters of John Calvin*, 67.

with candor speaking unflinchingly on matters of death to those bereaved brings life.

Consider his counsel to his Christian brother Richard Vauville upon the death of Richard's wife:

Among other things, this is no mean source of consolation, which nevertheless the flesh seizes upon to aggravate our sorrow, that you lived with a wife of such a disposition that you will willingly renew your fellowship with her when you shall be called out of this world. Then an example of dying piously was offered to you by the companion of your life. If it were my task to exhort a private person, I should order him to weigh in his own mind what he owes to his Creator. For we unjustly defraud God of his right, unless each of us lives and dies in dependence on his sovereign pleasure.<sup>3</sup>

Modern bereavement practices lack this salience. Kowtowing to the easily offended, modern pastors omit from the vocabularies of their pulpits the greatest of certainties, that every person present will face judgment after death. Thus, the anesthetized remain undisturbed in their slumbers. Hence, infant loss and miscarriage are beyond the threshold of politeness and so remain unaddressed as the voice of biblical candor is disappearing.

This statement is not to aggrandize the magisterial Reformers. Calvin, at times, struggled with the ways of God.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, the Reformers' unmitigated devotion to Scripture set the church free and revolutionized pastoral ministry. "By transferring the locus of authority from the Catholic magisterium to the written Word of God, the reformers enhanced the personal authority of the minister, who was now entrusted with special responsibility to interpret and proclaim the sacred text."<sup>5</sup> This newfound pastoral authority led a cataclysmic change in Christian life. *The Book of Common Prayer* was first updated by the archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Cranmer in 1533 and then given

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<sup>3</sup> Calvin, *Letters of John Calvin*, 189.

<sup>4</sup> Herman J. Selderhuis, *John Calvin: A Pilgrim's Life* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 187.

<sup>5</sup> Scott M. Manetsch, *Calvin's Company of Pastors: Pastoral Care and the Emerging Reformed Church, 1536–1609*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 6.

an even more Protestant rendering in 1552 as *The Second Prayer Book of Edward VI*.<sup>6</sup> This new approach to prayer itself liberated believers from the Catholic Church's restrictions on how people mourned and were ministered to. Pastors began ministering with Scripture unmitigated.

One caveat to this particular brand of candor is that it is heavily contextualized by the culture of the Reformation era. Culturally contextualized candor would call for certain word choices in one century and different word choices in another. Tone, pacing, and timing in good bereavement ministry practice evolve over time, but clarity does not.

Emulating Martin Luther's sense of candor in a modern ministry context would call for nuancing. For example, a modern pastor using verbatim Luther's words of counsel to a bereaved father named Caspar Heydenreich on April 24, 1545, would constitute an utter failure to care pastorally in today's context. Luther wrote, "However, there is nothing disgraceful about your being moved somewhat by the natural, carnal affection of a father. The term 'father' is in itself one of sweet affection. For we are not stones, nor ought we to be. But moderation is necessary in these things."<sup>7</sup> These words are candid, but they are delivered coldly by modern standards; even if Luther had a prior relationship with Heydenreich that was high in trust. So, should modern bereavement ministry adopt this admirable clarity, it must first craft the same directness into a modern vernacular. Were Luther alive and ministering to bereaved parents today, his wording would be precisely as honest but more delicately sculpted.

However, there exists no greater force to rescue the potency of language itself than the church. That colloquial language is weaker now than it once was is not a reason to let the pastoral voice of candor die. The voice proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas Cranmer, *The Second Prayerbook of King Edward VI, 1552* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> Martin Luther, *To Caspar Heydenreich*, in *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, ed. and trans. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955), 80.

has greater reason to speak than any other voice in the world, so let it be the most beautiful voice. The church has a greater reason to speak than the expiring philosopher of this age, so let the church speak with renewed eloquence. Speaking with both candor and eloquence about today's nearly forbidden subject of death, Luther wrote,

Oh, if we could only see the heart of Christ as he was suspended from the cross, anguishing to make death dead and contemptible . . . . If we could see this, then undoubtedly that precious myrrh dropping from Christ's lips and commended by his words would be sweet and appealing to us, even as the fragrance and beauty of the lilies. All that remains for us now is to pray that our eyes, that is, the eyes of our faith may be opened that we may see the church around us.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Softening of Doctrine and Its Effects**

The Reformers were better equipped than their successors to minister to the bereaved because they built their ministries upon *sola Scriptura* and a devotion to sound doctrine. The abuses of the Roman Catholic Church demanded a response whose doctrine was sound, and that response begot pastors of conviction, pastors suited well to minister to the bereaved not with ritual but with righteousness. In Luther's stated view, a Christian church has not only the right and the power but also the obligation to defy ritual in favor of God's Word.<sup>9</sup> In his faithful teaching of the Word, Luther compelled believers to endure sufferings and grief, to join the storied ranks of afflicted Christians past who did not fear persecution or pain. With the sun's setting on an era of sound doctrine rose a dark night of lesser teaching.

Luther's sermon at Coburg on April 16, 1530 resounds, "It has to be such a cross and suffering that it has a name and honestly grips and hurts, such as some great danger to property and honor, or body and life. This is the kind of suffering that one

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<sup>8</sup> Martin Luther, *Weimarer Ausgabe* 6:119.7–13, 132.20–22, quoted in and translated by Jane E. Strohl, "Luther's Fourteen Consolations," in *The Pastoral Luther: Essays on Martin Luther's Practical Theology*, ed. Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 321–22.

<sup>9</sup> Gert Haendler, *Luther on Ministerial Office and Congregational Function*, ed. Eric W. Gritsch, trans. Ruth C. Gritsch (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 60.

really feels, and it hurts, because it would not be suffering if it did not hurt very much.”<sup>10</sup> This candor on suffering is diametrically opposed to the capitulating voice favored by the doctrinally weak church. Theologically inept pastors lack the tools to give clarity to grieving mothers asking pointed questions.

### **Divergences among the Magisterial Reformers**

Granted, not all of the magisterial Reformers agreed on the finer points of infant salvation. Both Ulrich Zwingli and Martin Luther affirmed infant salvation, but each arrived at the conclusion via differing scriptural paths. Luther built his case upon Genesis 17, in which circumcision upon the eighth day of life codified the infant’s share in his Law-abiding family’s protection as part of God’s elect nation of Israel. When asked about the eternal fate of a boy who died before circumcision, Luther answered, “The souls of those infants must be left to the will of the Heavenly Father, who we know to be merciful.”<sup>11</sup> Luther himself embodied the ministry of a bereaved parent ministering to bereaved parents.<sup>12</sup> Zwingli, however, argued that infants are counted free from God’s judgment due to God’s work of election and that work does not require an exertion of faith on the part of the infant.<sup>13</sup> This is one pastoral instance in which an overtly Reformed theology, though often lacking in its capacity to bring comfort to the hurting, assuages the aching heart and eases the theodical questions. Never has a heart been so eager to embrace the doctrines of grace as a bereaved parent under the care of Ulrich

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<sup>10</sup> Martin Luther, “Sermon at Coburg on Cross and Suffering,” in *Luther’s Spirituality*, ed. and trans. Philip D. W. Krey and Peter D. S. Krey (New York: Paulist Press, 2007), 160.

<sup>11</sup> Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis*, in *Luther’s Works* 3:103, quoted in Adam Harwood, *The Spiritual Condition of Infants: A Biblical-Historical Survey and Systematic Proposal* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 114.

<sup>12</sup> Herman Selderhuis, *Martin Luther: A Spiritual Biography* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 215.

<sup>13</sup> Harwood, *The Spiritual Condition of Infants*, 118.

Zwingli.

Calvin's stance favored that of Zwingli but with greater emphasis on the infant's sin nature: "Even infants bear their condemnation with them from their mother's womb; for though they have not yet brought forth fruits of their own iniquity, they have the seed enclosed within themselves."<sup>14</sup> Calvin, like Zwingli, argued that deceased infants are part of the elect despite this sin seed. His confidence in infant salvation was conflated with his confidence in the legitimacy of pedobaptism: "Yet if they [infants] are participants in the thing signified, why shall they be debarred from the sign [baptism]? If they grasp the truth, why shall they be driven away from the figure?"<sup>15</sup> Calvin then drew a conclusion similar to that of this curriculum's author regarding the interaction of Jesus with children in the Gospel of Matthew:

For this reason, the Lord Jesus, wishing to give an example by which the world would understand that he came to enlarge rather than to limit the Father's mercy, tenderly embraces the infants offered to him, chiding his disciples for trying to deny them access to him, because they were leading away from him those to whom the Kingdom of Heaven belonged [Matt. 19:13–15].<sup>16</sup>

Though permuted differently, each of these Reformers agreed upon the doctrine of election, whose prime foundation is the ninth chapter of Romans. Here, the unborn twins of Jacob and Esau are pronounced innocent in their conduct though depraved in their natures (Rom 9:11). The soteriology of the magisterial Reformers united them, but their approaches to infant salvation varied, thereby diverging their words of counsel to parents bereaved by infant loss or miscarriage.

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<sup>14</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.15.10, in *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics (1960; repr., Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 1311.

<sup>15</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.16.5 (McNeill, 1328).

<sup>16</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.16.7 (McNeill, 1329).

## **Bereavement Ministry in the Reformers’ Historical Context**

A modern world of pregnancy tests followed by increasingly sensitive pregnancy tests would have been foreign to the Reformers. In generations past, certainly women miscarried without a way of knowing they had lost their babies. Given current pregnancy test capabilities, however, there is an increase in the bereavement ministry to be done that is beyond the increase in population since the sixteenth century. Even if the modern rate of miscarriages were identical to that of sixteenth-century Europe, there exists now a heightened acuity to miscarriages that would give a comparatively greater percentage of mothers a reason to grieve. Where one generation was gracefully ignorant, modern women are dreadfully aware. Thus, even if the modern pastor were to revive the Reformers’ admirable devotion to *sola Scriptura*, their thunderous voices of candor, and their fearlessness in facing death, he still faces a more quantitatively sizeable task than his predecessors. There are simply more bereaved mothers and fathers who are aware of their bereavement now.

However, the fading of the age of plagues, which precipitated the deaths of infants in past eras, has also altered the landscape and demands of bereavement ministry. Luther himself lost two children.<sup>17</sup> Pestilence was rampant. These medical circumstances produced radically different bereavement experiences than the modern experience of miscarriage early in the first trimester. Many bereaved parents saw their children suffer symptoms before passing. This actuality subjected bereaved parents to a separate form of trauma that further compounded their grief.

## **Reviving the Reformers’ Bereavement Practices**

A modern pastor who is devoted to the Word of God with the very rigor of the Reformers need not fear himself ill-equipped unto the task. Scripture has lost none of its

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<sup>17</sup> Robert Kolb, “Luther and the Theology of the Cross,” in Wengert, *The Pastoral Luther*, 36.

efficacy, and candor has lost none of its benefits. Consider the timelessness of Luther's biblical words of consolation to women who have experienced miscarriage:

“Call upon me,” God says in Ps. 50[:15], “In the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.” For this reason, we ought not to condemn such infants. Believers and Christians have devoted their longing and yearning and praying for them. Nor ought we consider them as the same as others for whom no faith, prayer, or yearning are expressed on the part of Christians and believers. God intends that the divine promise, and our prayer or yearning that is grounded in that promise, should not be disdained or rejected, but be highly valued and esteemed.<sup>18</sup>

Death, though it arrives upon parishioners through different means and at later ages, remains just as statistically certain today as it was in the sixteenth century and God's Word remains just as spiritual certain today as it was in Luther's era. Jesus's promise over his church remains steadfast. The gates of Hades will not overcome it, so let the modern pastor resurrect the forgotten bereavement practices of the Reformers and adapt them for the modern age and its unique needs. Subsequent generations will likewise benefit from these stainless tools as scriptural truth does not expire with age, and candor grows only more and more necessary in eras of increasing relativism and deception. In the wake of original sin, there will always be bereaved parents. Will there always be suitable pastors such as the Reformers?

### **The Comparative Strength of Christian Resources on Infant Loss and Miscarriage**

The unavoidable end of the atheistic worldview is nihilism, yet atheists will eschew the “nihilist” moniker. Nihilists have nothing to offer bereaved parents yet publish resources for them nevertheless. Nihilists, by their very worldview, lack any motivation to reach out to anyone regarding any matter ever yet feel an intense motivation to speak from an assumed sense of meaning to bereaved mothers and fathers in their times of greatest need. Likely, these authors have experienced tragedy and are

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<sup>18</sup> Mary Jane Haemig, “Consolation to Women Whose Pregnancies Have Not Gone Well,” in *The Annotated Luther*, vol. 4, *Pastoral Writings* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 427.

attempting to process it. Thus, a book that ought not exist is written. Ironic that an author who cannot explain his own existence produces a book whose existence cannot be explained by its underlying premise. By nihilistic standards, every event is meaningless, and this would include the loss of a child. Nonetheless, atheistic authors belie their nihilism by observing meaning in the child's life. This practice evidences total depravity. Nihilistic authors are mouthpieces for the very forces about whom they profess disbelief—both good and evil, but evil more often. They feign neutrality but often speak satanic hopelessness over the bereaved parent when they ought not speak at all. Juxtapose this underlying philosophy with the hope offered by Christian author Jessalyn Hutto:

One thing we can know plainly is why horrible events like miscarriage happen in the first place. When every fiber of our being is crying out, “this is not good! Something about this is terribly wrong!” the Bible doesn't come up empty. In fact, the Bible gives us the only satisfactory explanation for both the existence of such tragedies *and* our natural inclination to grieve them. We needn't look any further than its first few pages, in the book [sic] of Genesis, to learn how death and suffering entered our world, and why their very existence strikes us all as inherently wrong.<sup>19</sup>

The biblical worldview alone offers hope to the bereaved parent. There is no pagan text or self-contradictory nihilistic musing that can offer hope to the mother or father of a deceased child. By the gospel of Jesus Christ, mothers and fathers may have the hope of seeing their children again, the hope of eternal healing in for their grieving hearts, and the hope of understanding the eternal significance of their children's lives. Buddhism offers no such peace, nor do Taoism, Islam, Hinduism, Norse mythologies, or any other pagan worldview. Because of the peace offered by the gospel, Christian resource providers operate from a foundation that equips them to minister to bereaved parents, and afflicted peoples of all plights, better than resource providers from other presuppositional persuasions. Thus, individually focused resources for bereaved parents

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<sup>19</sup> Jessalyn Hutto, *Inheritance of Tears: Trusting the Lord of Life when Death Visits the Womb* (Hudson, OH: Cruciform Press, 2015), 19.

have always been superior to those offered from secular worldviews.<sup>20</sup> Consider the scriptural promises woven into the tapestry of John Newton's words as he comforted the anonymous recipient of one of his published letters. He said of Jesus's ministry to the hurting that Jesus "puts their tears in his bottle; and when our spirits are overwhelmed within us, he knows our path . . . . He has sanctified poverty, pain, disgrace, temptation, and death, by passing through these states; and in whatever states his people are, they may by faith have fellowship with him in their sufferings."<sup>21</sup>

### **Addressing Eternity**

A focus on eternity is necessary when treating lifelong wounds of the soul. In this realm, only Christian resources may tread. Secular resources need not apply. The mortal wounds of the bereaved parent's soul will not be healed by speculation or entreaties to multiple conflicting views simultaneously without irony. It is no time to be conciliatory. The grieving mother or father has no interest in wild theories from authors who have failed to answer fundamental questions about life, death, and meaning. One whose entire epistemology hinges upon admitted ignorance ought not delve into theories as to the eternal destinations of infant souls. Because a secular author cannot answer the questions, "From whence comes matter?," "How could life possibly self-generate?," and "Where does our shared sense of morality come?," he has no business attempting to answer the questions of a grieving mother and father.

The bereaved parent asks questions on eternity, so worldviews that deal in the eternal need only attempt to answer them. Atheistic authors, when attempting to comfort bereaved parents, must betray their previously held presuppositions and reason in terms

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<sup>20</sup> This concept is weighed more heavily, and exemplified more specifically, in subsequent sections. There are pagan worldviews which would attempt to persuade parents of a falsified hope, but this hope is built on satanic lies. As such, it does not sustain grieving parents.

<sup>21</sup> John Newton, *Cardiphonia: or, The Utterance of the Heart; in the Course of a Real Correspondence* (Edinburgh: Oliphant, Waugh, & Innes, 1814), 21.

that take eternity into account, something atheistic authors wholesale refuse when dealing with the gospel. Christians, however, via revelational epistemology, may know with certainty that which is impossible for the human mind to ascertain on its own apart from God's revelation. Other faith systems have attempted to bridge the chasm between humankind's innate inkling that eternity matters more than the temporal but have failed to do so. When one comes to terms with the reality that universes do not self-generate *ex nihilo*, that abiogenesis is impossible on its own terms, and that morality is both transcendent and authoritative, which of the vast array of worldviews does one espouse? What if the one true worldview is not offered, has been forgotten, has not yet been revealed, or cannot be known? Upon full belief of the Kalam cosmological argument, the skeptic on the brink of eternity is no closer to heaven than he was before embracing the Muslim Kalam's namesake and forgery of Hebrews 11:6. Because of revelational epistemology, Christians may answer questions of eternity such as those asked by bereaved parents. Cornelius Van Til articulates exquisitely the reason Christians may answer eternal questions, or even know things at all, better than resource providers of other persuasions:

According to Scripture, God has created the "universe." God has created time and space. God has created all the "facts" of science. God has created the human mind. In this human mind God has laid the laws of thought according to which it is to operate. In the facts of science God has laid the laws of being according to which they function. In other words, the impress of God's plan is upon his whole creation. We may characterize this whole situation by saying that the creation of God is a revelation of God. God revealed himself in nature and God also revealed himself in the mind of man. Thus it is impossible for the mind of man to function except in an atmosphere of revelation. And every thought of man when it functioned normally in this atmosphere of revelation would express the truth as laid in the creation by God. We may therefore call a Christian epistemology a revelational epistemology.<sup>22</sup>

This authority of the Christian worldview has also withstood the case study of human history. Paul mocks his contemporaries in 1 Corinthians 1:20, writing, "Where is

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<sup>22</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology* (Philipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969), 1.

the one who is wise? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the debater of this age? Hasn't God made the world's wisdom foolish?" Indeed, where are the debaters of Paul's age? The ashes of their empires have long since scattered and the impotent speculations of their pagan worldviews with them. Christianity stands and, thus, is better suited to assuage the aching hearts of parents longing to know the eternal destinations of their children. Where Buddhism fails to know even the truth, where Islam confuses, where atheism speculates and self-contradicts, Christianity knows and knows with eternal certainty. For these reasons, resources for bereaved parents drawing from empty wells have failed, and resources for bereaved parents drawing from the Word of God have given eternal hope.

### **Describing Innocence**

To describe a dead child as "innocent," a practice ubiquitous in books from all worldviews, is to assume the converse of guilt. To assume that guilt exists is to assume a transcendent authoritative moral law exists. Therefore, any material that would proclaim a baby "innocent" without portending some form of eternal moral judgment fails. The word "innocent" belongs to God, and pagan authors ought not appropriate it.

The moral argument for God, posited most accurately by Christian resources, is another reason for the comparative strength of Christian bereavement materials in effectively ministering comfort and answering the pressing questions of eternity. John MacArthur rightly emphasizes the innocence of the innocents in Scripture. God alone may proclaim someone innocent as all adults have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. So, in describing the genocidal practices of pagan worship through child sacrifice at Ben Hinnom Valley as spilling "the blood of the innocent," in Jeremiah 19:4, God is indirectly proclaiming infants innocent. It is by God's grace that any sinful person would be saved, and it is by that same grace that infants may be called "innocent" by God. They

have bypassed the depravity known well by adults.<sup>23</sup> When resources built on other worldviews attempt to describe the unborn and infants as “innocent,” they beg the question and instantly espouse a standard of morality which they previously denied. When Christian resources use the term “innocent,” they evoke the authoritative proclamation of innocence made possible by the blood of Jesus. So, secular authors cannot possibly write about the innocence of babies without assuming that there is such thing as guilt and, therefore, eternal moral justice, over which exists the one true Arbiter.

The innocence of infants is instinctively known but human innocence itself is impossible apart from Christ. By Christ’s work, Christians may believe that infants are appointed to death in a state of innocence purchased by Christ.<sup>24</sup> By the Christian view, even babies sinful from the moment of conception, as David wrote in Psalm 51, have committed no willful sins and are justified and even sanctified by the work of Jesus. There is nothing in the whole of pagan philosophy, atheistic reasoning, or even deism that compares to such a beautiful thought. There seems written upon all hearts a deep-set belief that babies are innocent, but that belief finds its most promising foundation in Christian thought and is less convincing when spoken from pagan or atheistic foundations. Atheists lack a standard by which to define innocence. Christians have one who makes the sinner innocent.

### **Hope Eternal or Hope Impotent?**

“Mere sentimentalism ignores the Bible’s teaching which bears on the issue. We have no right to establish doctrine on the basis of what we *hope* may be true. We must draw our answers from what the Bible *reveals* to be true.”<sup>25</sup> Because Christian

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<sup>23</sup> John MacArthur, *Safe in the Arms of God: Truth from Heaven about the Death of a Child* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), 39,114.

<sup>24</sup> Lewis M. Ayer, *Infant Salvation according to the Bible* (New York: Ward & Drummond, 1879), 246.

<sup>25</sup> R. Albert Mohler Jr. and Daniel L. Akin, “The Salvation of the ‘Little Ones’: Do Infants Who Die Go to Heaven?,” *Albert Mohler*, July 16, 2009, <https://albertmohler.com/2009/07/16/the->

resource providers do not draw from their own fallow and contrived authority, but appeal to the authority of Scripture, they are able to speak with confidence where resource providers from other persuasions must grasp, stretch, embellish, aggrandize, or outright fabricate. Writing from a foundation of revelational epistemology, however, the Christian resource provider may speak with authority borrowed directly from God’s Word.

Consider the example of John MacArthur. Observe the authoritative voice in which he writes as an expositor:

The very moment your child saw Christ, your child was instantly and summarily made utterly perfect, completely transformed into the image of Christ Jesus. Your child has a desire to please God—a heart for working and praise and service to God. Your child has a glory about him or her that cannot fade. It is a glory that comes from the inside out (Rom. 8:18).<sup>26</sup>

These words are precisely what a bereaved parent would hope to hear, and they soar all the more triumphantly precisely because MacArthur’s *curriculum vitae* as an unflinching expositor of all Scripture proves his intentions.<sup>27</sup> Note his use of a Scripture reference. He is drawing not from his own speculations, emotions, or even from some other fallible human source of authority. He is referring to Romans 8:18, which says, “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is going to be revealed to us.” So, objections to what the biblical expositor writes are to be addressed not directly with the earthly author as much as with the heavenly Author. MacArthur’s authority is not his own.

Now, review the above text and consider the audacity required of a secular author to make such authoritative claims. Bereaved parents would more likely receive such certainty with skepticism. They would rightly inquire as to the source of this revelation and assume certainty. This is not so with expositional counsel for bereaved

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salvation-of-the-little-ones-do-infants-who-die-go-to-heaven/.

<sup>26</sup> MacArthur, *Safe in the Arms of God*, 114.

<sup>27</sup> At the time of writing, MacArthur’s ministry “Grace to You” is celebrating its fiftieth anniversary and MacArthur’s completion of an expository curation through every book of the Bible.

parents such as that which MacArthur offers in the above passage. The hope that MacArthur offers does not depend upon him but upon God. It transcends even the author himself, and so it appeals to a knowledge that is beyond earthly wisdom. Only such a wisdom that encompasses all that may be known in the universe may meaningfully grant hope to bereaved parents. All other hopes offered outside of this transcendent Logos are impostors.

It is a storied tradition of Christian resources for those who grieve to appeal to Scripture. The famed *Streams in the Desert* comes not only from L. B. Cowman's own intense grief amid bereavement but from a high view of Scripture. For this reason, the book has been printed and reprinted numerous times and in numerous editions spanning decades. Observe the authority to which Cowman appeals:

Let us also call out to one another through the darkness until the night becomes alive with the sound of many voices, encouraging God's weary travelers. And may the echoes grow into a storm of hallelujahs that will break in thundering waves around His sapphire throne. Then as the morning dawns, we will find ourselves on the shore of the "sea of glass" (Rev. 4:6), crying out with the redeemed hosts of heaven, "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!" (Rev. 5:13).<sup>28</sup>

Cowman's objectors must raise their objections with the Author of Revelation. Because Cowman ministers from bereavement to bereaved on the authority of Scripture, the hope she offers is eternal in nature. It is not from within; it is from without. It is beyond the author, and so it is not stained by her sin. Only Christian voices may offer such hope.

Ronald Nash catalogs a triumphant processional of Christian authors giving hope to bereaved parents for the eternal destination of their children's souls and using Scripture to found their words of hope. Charles Hodge, John Newton, Augustus Toplady, and Benjamin B. Warfield have published words of hope built on Matthew 19:13–15, Mark 10:13–16, and Luke 18:15–17.<sup>29</sup> This ministry is the Lord's doing, and he has been

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<sup>28</sup> L. B. Cowman, *Streams in the Desert: 366 Daily Devotional Readings*, ed. Jim Reimann (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 488.

<sup>29</sup> Ronald Nash, *When a Baby Dies: Answers to Comfort Grieving Parents* (Grand Rapids:

drawing bereaved parents in to see the authority of Scripture for generations. This ministry has been blessed by fruit spanning the centuries—converted parents now reconciled in heaven with their children because of this faithful ministry of the Word.

### **The Weakness of Grief Resources and the Promise of Bible Studies for Bereavement**

In the opening of their popular book for grieving fathers, secular authors Kelly Farley and David DiCola deliberately reinforce to the reader that hope is not likely to be found. When they do give some semblance of acknowledgment to hope, it is mitigated heavily with passive language and qualifiers. Their admitted prompt for writing is not that they had found hope but that there was a dearth of resources on the subject. Moreover, DiCola and Farley exacerbate the hackneyed “Five Stages of Grief” to include “Shock and Trauma.”<sup>30</sup> This book is structured around the horrific stories of actual children’s deaths. Morbid details are included, and strong language abounds. Macabre scenes are painted with word pictures in grieving readers’ minds, including vivid descriptions of vomit and blood. It tells the story of one son’s last breath. It tells the story of a father cutting his son down from a ceiling fan. It is a catalogue of the worst moments of bereaved fathers’ lives printed and promulgated to bereaved fathers. This text points to its dearth of hope as an indicator of its objectivity, and its endorsers praise it precisely for its lack of optimism, as though that were a criterion for accuracy or helpfulness. It is an expression of a shared horror and a carefully crafted sequence of psychological triggers arranged, perhaps, to desensitize readers or, at least, to establish rapport along the darkest bases imaginable. This unhelpful and bleak book is at least consistent with its worldview: it is presented without hope or even a pretense of hope.

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Zondervan, 1999), 65–70.

<sup>30</sup> David DiCola and Kelly Farley, *Grieving Dads: To the Brink and Back* (Aurora, IL: Grieving Dads, 2012), 1–6.

The equivalent offered from a feminist position, Linda L. Layne's popular *Motherhood Lost: A Feminist Account of Pregnancy Loss in America*, likewise oppresses the reader with devastating hopelessness. Mistaking graphicness with honesty, it gives morbid detail in describing Layne's serial miscarriages. The author's storytelling ability could have been used by God to invite mothers into hope and healing, but instead this dark gift is abused and serves only to amplify the pain of the reader. Often, in secular writings on grief and loss, the more pain a writing inflicts, the more likely it is to be praised for its "honesty." Consider Layne's use of the word "it" to describe her baby here:

I don't know what I was expecting, but I remember how shocked I was when days after I had stopped bleeding, I discovered the embryo. It looked just like the pictures in the pregnancy books, and I was confused about what to do with it. I called my husband, but he would not look at it; in the end I flushed it down the toilet, then regretted having done so.<sup>31</sup>

This book's closing chapter is a championing of the feminist agenda. It does not offer meaningful hope to the grieving mother. The author is honest about her lack of understanding on the matter she knows so tragically well. She is honest in her personal account about the pain she experiences. However, she is unable to point readers to any meaningful, transcendent hope. She does not delve into the mystery of where she obtained this standard by which she calls the serial deaths of her unborn children "tragic." Instead, she assimilates her experiences to cajole an emotional response from the reader and then directs that emotion to unabashedly advance the feminist agenda. It is a horrific *non sequitur*. Upon the legacy of her children's deaths, the author has chosen to rally readers to a political cause. This will leave Layne herself wholly dissatisfied, the memory of her children besmudged, and her readers chasing a false god built on an altar in the traditions of Molech and Chemosh. To grieve the deaths of her miscarried children and to

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<sup>31</sup> Linda L. Layne, *Motherhood Lost: A Feminist Account of Pregnancy Loss in America* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 4.

defend abortion in the same voice is fallacious.

Again, though, this book is at the very least consistent with the worldview upon which it is constructed. Like DiCola and Farley, Layne never pretends to have hope and never pretends to write from a heavenly perspective. There exists a meager hope, but a hope nevertheless, that the paltry teachings these books offer will leave the unsaved reader unsatisfied and curious about Christian resources on the subject.

### **When Christian Resources Fail**

In an act of poor stewardship, some Christian authors have failed to give bereaved parents truth while the truth is in their very hands. These authors, rather than letting the Bible do what only the Bible can do, rather than directing readers to Jesus and his Word, and rather than drawing upon the authority of the world's greatest source of wisdom, have turned to the same failed devices used by their secular counterparts. Worse, they did so under the banner of Christianity.

Perhaps a product of poor preaching in their home churches, perhaps due to their infancy as Christians, or perhaps due to the ethical shortcomings of a Christian self-publishing industry, books claiming the name of Christ are promulgated to grieving mothers and fathers but offer mere rhetoric. Some of these authors may emulate the teaching styles of their "seeker-sensitive" pastors as they deliberately avoid difficult passages on child death such as 2 Samuel 12. Others may simply lack theological training of any sort but provide content that is sought out by publishers. However, examples abound of aspiring authors self-publishing their wares digitally with front matter cleverly formatted to resemble that of a traditionally published book. The self-publishing industry appeals to delusion and removes the traditional gatekeepers who rightly denied some works the honor of publication while editing and enhancing the works of authors whose works are theologically sound from the start. As a result, an unsaved grieving mother or father may overlook the painstaking exposition of Scripture offered by experienced

pastor and bereaved father Ryan Showalter<sup>32</sup> and instead read an unvetted self-published work by an author who answers to no theological review board, who does not qualify to teach as per the Pastoral Epistles, but whose work is salaciously titled.

Consider Mark Jones's potent work that addresses infant death directly. In *Faith. Hope. Love.: The Christ-Centered Way to Grow in Grace*, Jones attempts to apply the reformed tradition to today's context. While he curates a series of passages pertaining to the matter and does steward the Word faithfully, he fails to answer his own question. The chapter is titled "May we have hope regarding the death of infants?," but there is no hope offered. The final sentence proffers Genesis 18:25, but seemingly as a footnote, or even an awkward non-sequitur. There is no exposition of this final verse that might fulfill the chapter's eponymous quest, nor is there a firm answer "no" given to the question the chapter asks. There is no clear biblical hope for bereaved parents in this chapter under the subheading "Hope." Though the summation of the chapter is anticlimactic, Jones does masterfully answer objections and properly qualify false hopes with unflinching exposition of multiple angles presented on infant salvation from both Scripture and reformed tradition.<sup>33</sup>

### **The Hope of Sound Bible Study**

Despite the overwhelming deluge of philosophically fractured works by secular and non-Christian authors, and despite even the disconcerting false teachings released under Christian labels, there are promising resources that pay proper respect to the authority of the Bible. In *Forgiving God*, Carla McClafferty devotes an entire chapter to Scripture passages relevant to the grieving heart of a bereaved parent.<sup>34</sup> Pam Vredevelt

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<sup>32</sup> Ryan Showalter, *Grieving the Loss of Your Child: Comfort for Your Broken Heart* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2014).

<sup>33</sup> Mark Jones, *Faith. Hope. Love.: The Christ-Centered Way to Grow in Grace* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 141.

<sup>34</sup> Carla Killough McClafferty, *Forgiving God: A Woman's Struggle to Understand when God*

repeatedly drives readers to the Bible and encourages them to read it for even a few minutes at a time despite their grief-rendered fatigue.<sup>35</sup> John MacArthur states that his mission in *Safe in the Arms of God* was “to search Scriptures on this subject so I could reach out and offer biblically founded words of comfort and encouragement.”<sup>36</sup> The cultural shift in values away from Scripture has caused Scripture to become more marketable because it is, once again, controversial. As such, there is reason to hope that more and more Bible-based resources will find proper footing for growth in the marketplace and, thereby, reach more and more bereaved parents.

When expository materials are offered in a way that aligns with their original historical-cultural contexts and, thus, their original intents, the Spirit’s work is the least mitigated as the living Word affects the hearts and lives of the bereaved. Scripture is timeless, and, as such, a resurgence of expositional resources would precipitate a revival of classic resources. While New Age materials disappear from view, biblical resources remain bulwarks. This phenomenon is not new but simply the modern realization of Paul’s Spirit-inspired *schadenfreude* in 1 Corinthians 1:20: “Where is the debater of this age?” The staying power of Bible-based resources in the marketplace is a testimony even to the unsaved.

A percolating revival of a conviction for *sola Scriptura* from the pulpits and the publishers brings hope for bereaved parents. Bible studies that give proper context to Scripture, illuminate its original world, clarify its literary context, and apply it practically in today’s context are increasingly available. Resources that invite bereaved parents not on a tour of the fellow mourners’ horror stories (in the fashion of the aforementioned secular books, for example) but on a tour of relevant Scripture passages are available in

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*Answers No* (n.p.: Backyard Swing, 2014), 107–27.

<sup>35</sup> Pam Vredevelt, *Empty Arms: Hope and Support for Those Who Have Suffered a Miscarriage, Stillbirth, or Tubal Pregnancy* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah, 1994), 28.

<sup>36</sup> MacArthur, *Safe in the Arms of God*, 2.

more formats in the age of online commerce than ever before.<sup>37</sup> The refining of video technology and its availability to consumers allows quality biblical teaching to meet bereaved parents precisely at the place where they search for answers—their computers and mobile devices. Christian publishers are capitalizing on the movement and offering sound content to meet the need, and this brings with it a digital wave of eternal hope for those who grieve and seek biblical wisdom.

What remains is for further content to be developed tailored specifically for bereaved parents. Curricula and books for those who have lost loved ones in general may be found, but the palpable need for parental bereavement curriculum grows in its urgency. Technological advancements in live video conferencing, sermon streaming, and counselor interaction have grown rapidly. Now, the corporate church needs parental bereavement resources to grow rapidly in proportion.

The ecclesial need is primed for a resurgence of the lost practices of the magisterial Reformers articulated now through the technological tools at the church's disposal. The long-quieted voice of candor may resound again but now at 5.6 megabytes per second to invite bereaved parents into live fellowship with a Bible-based conference of believers who hear directly from Scripture. Where secular and pagan voices have repeatedly failed their own readers and viewers, succeeding only when they appropriate Christian truths, biblical resources that offer an authoritative word of hope through the gospel of Jesus Christ may once again overcome nihilistic futility. The philosophers of the age will pass away as their predecessors did, but the Word of the Lord stands forever (Ps 33:11).

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<sup>37</sup> LifeWay Christian Resources' Digital Bible Studies and RightNow Media's video teaching growth are evidences of this advancement at work.

## **The Wonderful Counselor Ministering to Bereaved Parents**

“If anyone speaks, let it be as one who speaks God’s words,” Peter exhorted pastors in 1 Peter 4:11a. As Scripture’s longstanding strength in the marketplace of resources for bereaved parents resurges, it will call upon Spirit-filled preachers and writers to do justice to the text in-hand and the task at-hand. Myk Habets writes of this interpretive process: “Our confidence rests in the all-encompassing activity of the Spirit as we read the words of Scripture whose very being is the product of the Spirit’s activity.”<sup>38</sup> Without the anointing of the Holy Spirit and the Word of God in his hand, the minister standing before the grieving mothers and fathers of a secular culture is woefully unprepared.

However, filled with the Spirit and equipped with the Word, it is an unfair fight against the principalities who would drag anguished parents further into darkness. May the Word call the lost and grieving by name from their graves, and may the bedraggled lost come from their tombs just like Lazarus, who was resurrected. This is the hope offered by God’s Word only. Absolutely nothing else will suffice.

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<sup>38</sup> Myk Habets, *The Spirit of Truth: Reading Scripture and Constructing Theology with the Holy Spirit* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 71.

## CHAPTER 4

### DETAILS AND DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

From my perspective, this endeavor was a doctoral project. From the perspective of Highlands Community Church in Renton, Washington, it was a conference named “Aiden’s Hope.” Aiden’s Hope is the continuation of a ministry that began at First Baptist Church Windermere, Florida, in 2012, where God moved mightily in the congregation through Aiden’s miraculous life. Through publishing, Aiden’s legacy grew exponentially, and now, through this doctoral project, it has scaling upward to a new phase of equipping others to do this work of bereavement ministry in the form of the Aiden’s Hope conference. What began as a doctoral project proposal became manifest as an incredibly fruitful conference and has grown into a beautiful movement of the gospel that will continue into the foreseeable future at Highlands Community Church. The overall process, from pre-curriculum planning to the delivery of the curriculum and the discipleship of the bereaved parents who received it, may be chronicled across the preparation, implementation, and follow-up periods.

#### **Description of the Preparation Period**

In the first week of the ten-week preparation period, the pre-curriculum survey instrument was pilot-tested. Its initial draft was forwarded to members of the church staff, and notes were collected via email. In all, few alterations were made, though the need for a survey required explanation. Understandably, members of the staff were reticent to ask a series of questions about bereaved parents’ worst pains, and two experienced staff members—independently from one another—shared that the survey itself would reduce the number of people who would attend the conference. These staff members were

concerned that bereaved parents would see the survey and decide not to attend, having been triggered by the questions. Though chapter 5 discusses this further, those same staff members were so blessed by the results that they plan to use surveys in the future.

The first pilot test of the survey instrument came from a former staff member, the previous Student Pastor, whose daughter was lost to an automotive accident at nineteen years of age. His response was, wisely, the caution not to use language that suggested all bereaved parents may be reunited with their children one day. Though many attendees would likely be the parents of children lost as infants or before they reached an age at which they understood the truth of the gospel and then suppressed that truth with wickedness, many attendees would have lost older children. Fortunately for this particular man and his bride, their lovely daughter professed Christ and led an evangelistically fruitful life in Christ that gave them assurance of her salvation. Two mothers of miscarried children also pilot-tested the survey and gave no notes. Finally, upon the approval of my Research Profile, the approving body gave only the note that this survey should inform subjects that licensed counseling would be available at the conference.

The survey itself was deliberately minimalist because it is most ethical to ask few questions of bereaved parents. Opening with obligatory questions to dismiss minors from the research, the survey moved on to ask questions regarding the Bible and child loss. Each of these subsequent questions had the potential to minister to the heart of the one to whom the survey was being administered, but they also had the risk of causing psychological pain, and that in an environment in which pastoral care could be given. An exhaustive barrage of 25 questions regarding arguably the most painful of human experiences asked directly of people who have experienced that pain would be unethical. So, the survey was succinct for pastoral and ethical reasons.

While the feedback on the pre-curriculum survey instrument taken in both the first week and thereafter upon research approval did not yield any edits of the survey, this

feedback did directly affect the copy used in marketing “Aiden’s Hope.” To register for the conference, parents had to first complete the brief survey.

David Newcomb, Communications Director at Highlands Community Church, created a brand palette for the conference, built the website “aidenshope.org,” and filmed the story video featured on the website. This video told Aiden’s testimony and offered bereaved parents hope through the gospel. It featured Aiden’s grandparents speaking to grandparents who have lost grandchildren. This was an important aspect of the ministry as there are twice as many bereaved grandparents as there are bereaved parents. After two initial planning meetings, the budget for the conference was set, and the price was set at \$50 per individual and \$75 per couple to cover the costs of all meals and to pay the two licensed Christian counselors by honorarium. The conference itself existed outside of the budget for Highlands Community Church without a designated fund so as to accommodate the conference’s unforeseeable attendance. Given the scarcity of such conferences, the focused nature of its reach, and the unpredictability of registrations, the fee allowed the funds taken in to grow in perfect proportion to the event’s costs.

Due to a pending contract with LifeWay Christian Resources, I reserved the intellectual property rights to the conference content. Admission charges were added so that should the conference develop a platform of its own beyond HCC in future iterations, it could do so without causing financial disruption to the regular ministerial functions of the church. The reason for the cost was communicated clearly in the marketing content, and scholarships were donated generously. Interestingly, six of the couples who received scholarships for Aiden’s Hope did not attend, whereas all of those who paid in full upon registration attended.

### **Writing the Sermons**

The contents of chapter 2 were sent to the members of the expert panel along with the Curriculum Evaluation Rubric (see appendix 2). Each contributor to the panel

was given an overview of the conference, was familiarized with the author's preaching, and were selected from a complementary curation of relevant fields. At the advisement of professional doctoral faculty at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, this panel consisted of the following: a Southern Seminary professor, a Southern Baptist pastor with a doctorate, an experienced neonatal intensive care nurse at a prominent hospital in Orlando, and a women's ministry veteran in Seattle. See appendix 3 for more information.

While the positive responses in the panel's completed Curriculum Evaluation Rubric iterations affirmed the overall direction of the sermon content, further conversations with members of the panel and with supervising faculty provided more specific direction for the sermons that would form the actual content for the conference. The curriculum of passages was systematically arranged into an order that was pastorally strategic, and a series of interlocking expository sermons was written.

The first sermon came from Psalm 34:18–20, a word of comfort to the broken-hearted that also prophesies of Jesus on the cross in John 19:33–37. Having marketed a conference to bereaved parents across a large geographic region, knowing that there are very few conferences for bereaved parents, and being acutely aware of how hypersensitive bereaved parents can be, the first sermon was carefully crafted for what could possibly be the most easily offendable group ever gathered. So, with the endorsement of the expert panel, an expository sermon giving the original intent and context of Psalm 34 and then applying it through the gospel, as presented in John 19, was outlined. Each sermon was applied through a Christ-centered hermeneutic. Taking into account the possibility that some parents may leave after only the first sermon, the outline ended with the gospel. John 19:33–37 encompasses Psalm 34:20 and records the moment of its prophetic fulfillment in Jesus on the cross. So, that passage which gave these bereaved parents comfort was actually speaking to something eternally greater all the while. More than merely comforting their grieving hearts, this passage described how

Jesus made possible salvation for their souls.

The second sermon explicated Matthew 18:10–14 and offered biblical hope that babies go to heaven upon passing. Though some parents attending Aiden’s Hope would represent grown children, this question was far too pertinent to the hearts of those who have lost babies to ignore it. This sermon acknowledged the historical tension in the church’s varied answers to this question. To preserve the biblical integrity of the curriculum and to minister appropriately to the bereaved parents, this sermon did not posit a direct biblical promise of infant salvation. Rather, this sermon simply offered hope.

The third sermon brought the curriculum to the first of four answers to the question “Why did my child die?” This sermon came from Job 1:7–22 and 13:15. The expert panel provided excellent feedback in the writing of this sermon. My pastoral experience, the expertise of the women’s ministry veteran, and the input from the medical professional confirmed that bereaved parents are inundated with trite and useless colloquialisms in the midst of their trauma. No one talks about the devil when the devil has attacked. One of the most striking scandals of human history is that God would be blamed for Satan’s works. People often do not claim to believe in God until they experience something for which they ascribe him blame. God is sovereign. As per this text of Job, God mercifully provided parameters within which Satan was to abide while attacking Job’s family and eventually Job himself. God is sovereign, but Satan is responsible. This sermon called upon bereaved parents to reflect upon the question “Did I sin by blaming God with wrongdoing?” It provided an answer to the question “Why?” and then turned to ask the parents a painful—but necessary—question.

Job 13:15 reads, “Even if he kills me, I will hope in him. I will still defend my ways before him.” The first sentence extols the biblical standard for faith amid bereavement. The second poses an interpretive challenge, especially in the context of a bereaved parents’ conference. In writing this sermon, the outline allocated more time to

the first sentence while providing brief clarity about the second. Bitterness is an understandable effect of child loss, so some hermeneutical protections were necessary so as to prevent parents from adopting the second sentence of Job 13:15 as a contextually abused anthem for their bitterness. In eisegesis, “I will still defend my ways before him” could easily become “I will continue to insist that God was wrong to allow my child to die.” This sermon posed two prominent dangers: (1) asking parents a question that could overwhelm them and (2) introducing parents to a verse they could easily misunderstand and thereafter misuse.

However, the next Scripture passage in the curriculum of sermons posed the greatest danger of all. Tremendous care was taken in writing the sermon from 2 Samuel 12:1–25. Especially given the ministerial context of the Pacific Northwest wherein biblical literacy is generally low, a Bible story in which God overtly allows a baby to die because of parental sin could be the *coup de grâce* upon the already waning dedication of a bereaved Seattle liberal and skeptic barely willing to listen from the start. Nonetheless, the Bible is God’s Word, and, as such, it speaks more directly to bereaved parents in 2 Samuel 12:1–25 than it does anywhere else in Scripture. The simple reading of this passage to parents at the conference could likely prove sufficiently offensive to cause them to storm out of the room, slander the church, or possibly lash out in anger physically. Writing this sermon, therefore, drew heavily upon the inspiration described in the Scripture text itself. Nathan was so brilliant in the way he confronted David. This sermon was written in the tradition of Nathan’s savvy and in honor of Nathan’s boldness. Like Nathan, preachers today must say to bereaved parents what God has given them to speak.

Another bereaved parent in Scripture who inspired part of the curriculum was Naomi. Though Naomi’s bereavement is in periphery of the book of Ruth, it was absolutely necessary for the story’s outcome and for the modern gospel application of the book of Ruth. This Bible text showed promise in terms of its relatability for the audience

as Naomi disavowed her beautiful name in favor of the name “Mara,” which means “bitter.” Upon her arrival in her former hometown of Bethlehem with her fellow widow and daughter-in-law Ruth, Naomi gave an impassioned announced: “‘Don’t call me Naomi. Call me Mara,’ she answered, ‘for the Almighty has made me very bitter. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why do you call me Naomi since the Lord has opposed me and the Almighty has afflicted me?’” (Ruth 1:20–21).

Both Ruth 1:20–21 and 2 Samuel 12:1–25 have direct bearing on the Messianic line through David. So, the theological bridge to the gospel proved to be simple in its construction. However, the events of Ruth are so culturally nuanced that a large portion of this sermon was dedicated to explaining its historical-cultural context. Its levirate marriage roots in Deuteronomy 25:5–10 and its eschatological fulfillment in Revelation 5:1–15 are important to understand the text but could be very distracting from the overall thesis of the curriculum. In the weeks leading up to the implementation period for the curriculum, I agonized over which passages from Ruth and its background texts to omit in order to preach the text properly while abiding by the time constraints of the conference and not derailing the focus on bereaved parents. So, the primary text for this sermon were Ruth 1:1–5, 19–22, and 4:9–22. Its cross references, both important and brief, were Deuteronomy 25:5–10 and Revelation 5:1–15. These passages culminated in a gospel presentation from Matthew 1:2–6a, wherein the genealogy at the end of Ruth is reiterated en route to Jesus. While this was the most relatable text for the people receiving it, it also proved the most difficult text for me to preach.

The two subsequent texts in the curriculum, however, could quite naturally have been combined into one cohesive sermon that was stronger as a result. However, John 9:1–3 was the penultimate text, and 2 Corinthians 4:7–5:10 provided the basis for the final sermon. John 9:1–3 reads, “As he was passing by, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him: ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned,’ Jesus answered. ‘This came about

so that God's works might be displayed in him.”

This simple text carries immense theological weight and provides an answer directly from Jesus regarding a child born with a profound debilitation. There were such parents present at the Aiden's Hope conference. Jesus's final sentence in the passage revealed the “hope” in “Aiden's Hope.” As Aiden Isaiah Campbell's own story helped bring about the clinical field trial that resulted in the successful implanting of a 3D-printed trachea into a patient who lived, God may yet intend to use some of the other children represented at Aiden's Hope who were born afflicted. In Aiden's case, John 9:1–3 provided an answer to the question “Why did my child die?” And I hoped it would answer that question for other bereaved parents at Aiden's Hope.

Moreover, this text was the catalyst upon which the curriculum pivoted. The sermons from this juncture moved beyond answering the question “Why?” and looked to future applications given in the texts at hand. The conference continued to evangelize and minister healing, but it began to metastasize the next year's iteration of the conference from this point forward. From Psalm 34 to Matthew 18 to Job to 2 Samuel to Ruth, the curriculum pointed to Jesus and offered hope and clarity to bereaved parents. I intended John 9 to do all this and, in addition, mobilize parents. The man in John 9:1–3 was born blind so that the text of John 9 would be written and people throughout the generations, in addition to all of those physically present to witness the event firsthand, would see the works of God displayed in him. He was born blind so that people today may see. Never again would that man's parents feel the crushing weight of guilt for sin that may have so afflicted their son. Rather, for the rest of their lives, they could see the spiritual impact of their son's affliction: it was the catalyst by which God's works would be displayed, and now, every person who has ever read John 9 has known why this man was born blind. It was my hope that in applying that principle in the ministerial context of Aiden's Hope, the bereaved parents who attended the conference would follow my example and use their children's stories to minister to other bereaved parents. I wrote this sermon with this

optimistic application at the forefront—that the many bereaved parents of the Seattle area who lose their children, but who have no hope, would be met with the hope of the gospel as presented by a parent who attended the inaugural Aiden’s Hope conference. Thus, the works of God may be displayed directly through the man born blind in John 9 and indirectly through the fruit God bears in these modern children’s testimonies. It was my prayer that bereaved parents who attended the conference would go on to tell their stories to other bereaved parents, share the hope they have in Jesus, and see God save other bereaved parents. This ministerial fruit, evidencing itself after the actual conference was concluded, was intended to provide the fourth and final answer to the question “Why did my child die?” When they watch God use their testimonies to open someone’s heart to the gospel, these parents will then know why.

Second Corinthians 4:7–5:10 served as the basis for the final sermon that put temporary grief into an eternal perspective. Deliberately, this passage was chosen not only because it expounded upon the application of the previous John 9 sermon—that is, mobilizing parents unto ministry—but also because it was accessible to outsiders from the conference joining for the final session.<sup>1</sup> The words of 2 Corinthians 4:17 (“For our momentary light affliction is producing for us an absolutely incomparable eternal weight of glory.”) resonate well with the bereaved parent. In writing this sermon, I assumed some degree of trust in the listener, but I was careful not to overestimate such trust. Ultimately, I had to trust that the Holy Spirit would motivate the aggrieved Seattle skeptic to keep returning to the auditorium where the conference was held. Given the grace that was already taught by such sweet passages in the curriculum as Psalm 34:18–20, this sermon rightly dared to address the damnation of the parents themselves. If indeed their children are in heaven, the only hope these parents have of abiding in the

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<sup>1</sup> More details as to the strategic nature of this decision are to follow. What began as a six-session curriculum was later adapted to fit the realistic pragmatic demands of a two thousand-member church. This final session simultaneously served as the text of the Saturday night sermon for HCC.

coveted and indomitable peace that Paul described in 2 Corinthians 4–5 and seeing their children again comes through Jesus. Acknowledging their pain, the curriculum let 2 Corinthians 4–5 properly diminish such pain to the right perspective. It is nothing compared to the eternal weight of heavenly glory. So, this sermon was written with a modicum of daring, but little could be known up front about how it would be received.

Given the unpredictable nature of the conference’s overall congregational ethos, and given that these sermons were delivered after a stronger degree of familiarity with the strangers in the room was established, these outlines were developed with a great degree of flexibility. While the texts from John 9 and 2 Corinthians 4– 5 obviously did not fluctuate in their meanings or backgrounds over the course of the conference, the precise temperament in which they were preached had to be adjusted based on wisdom gained experientially as the conference progressed. Pastoral wisdom and the Spirit’s prompting while physically in the room dictated, at times, a differentiation of tone, an alteration of a previously outlined illustration choices, or an adjustment of intensity in wording. This project was not a philosophical endeavor; was for the dynamic, breathing, and grieving church. As such, the final two sermons were outlined with deliberate scarcity and designed flexibility to accommodate extemporaneous adjustments. These sermons were not written in staccato fashion as a motley parade of unrelated texts but in legato fashion as a singular flowing meta-sermon comprised of six systematically curated and pastorally delivered passages.

### **Planning the Conference around the Sermon Scriptures**

During weeks 1–10 in the preparation phase, the marketing efforts to invite people to the conference to hear the curriculum of sermons resulted in conference registrations. Taking into account the likelihood that the majority of attendees would not register for the conference until the final week possible, and knowing that meal-planning required at least one week’s notice, the deadline for registration was set for the week

prior to the event. So, reasonable attendance projections were able to be made if the number of registrations three months prior to the deadline comprised 10 percent of those who would attend.

Subject matter pertinent to people's greatest pain cannot be properly processed internally or through notes taken during a sermon. So, certified Christian counselors vetted by and connected to HCC were enlisted. A live Google Form updating in real-time and available at [aidenshope.org](http://aidenshope.org) to conference attendees allowed individuals or couples to reserve up to two time slots with the counselors. Enlisting only one counselor would have yielded a greater honorarium for him or her but could have also shortened the duration of each session in the event of a registration "spike" in the weeks immediately prior to the conference. The counselor would not likely be able to minister adequately to a couple processing the death of their son in light of 2 Samuel 12 with only half an hour's time. So, the Aiden's Hope team opted to enlist two counselors, one male and one female.

Strategically, the final session of Aiden's Hope was scheduled for the time slot and location usually used for the first of the six weekly worship services at HCC. The Saturday evening service was the least-attended service at HCC; so, given the projections based on conference registration trends, HCC's auditorium was able to accommodate the additional people comprising Aiden's Hope. As such, it was communicated to the Saturday night service attendees in the weeks prior to the conference that their usual book-by-book sermon plan would be interrupted with a message from 2 Corinthians 4–5 to coincide with Aiden's Hope. This way, the one hundred new faces from Aiden's Hope were deliberately oriented to worship at HCC. Those previously unassociated with HCC but who came to Aiden's Hope were able to meet members of HCC, hear directly from the heart of the Lead Pastor (i.e., me) at HCC who shares their bereavement, and experience the worship ministry at HCC—all of whom were prepared and eager to minister to the bereaved parents of Aiden's Hope.

The members of the team from the HCC's administrative staff and women's

ministry staff provided the final details necessary to create the optimal ministry environment. The Executive Pastor was enlisted to schedule two final meetings and create the digital workflows used in aligning the teams responsible for executing the administrative details of the conference. No detail was neglected.

Scheduling the conference itinerary took into account the curated Scriptures and their pastorally predicted impacts on the parents. The sessions covering the Job and 2 Samuel passages were followed by “table times” in which parents were able to speak with a random grouping of fellow attendees led by a trained member of HCC tasked with keeping the discussion fruitful. My wife, Jessi, visited each table and also graciously agreed to give a “question and answer” time at the end of the conference. Two weeks prior to the event, the Executive Pastor completed his task of organizing the final logistical meetings.

The final decisions on music were reserved for the end of the planning process. The HCC Media Director was tasked with providing a playlist of songs to set an appropriately reverent tone in the lobby spaces between sessions, in the fellowship hall during meals, and in the auditorium before and after sessions as well as during table times. The only task carried out in the final week of the planning process was the administrative team’s purchase of the food, which was prepared by volunteers for the mealtimes. This created a confident serenity for the team before the actual event itself.

### **Description of the Implementation Period**

Week 11 encased the implementation period—the Aiden’s Hope conference. Sessions 1–6 were strategically allocated across the event itinerary. Because the final session overlapped with the weekly HCC Saturday evening worship service, each sermon was preached with the culmination of the curriculum planned for session 6. “Table times” took place interstitially between sermons, and sessions with counselors were allocated throughout the event itinerary.

The women’s ministry and administrative teams recruited, of their own accord, a local artist to create the elegant centerpieces for each table in both the auditorium and fellowship hall. These centerpieces also served as gifts for the attendees. The word “Hope” sculpted from textured metal in delicate cursive font placed in a tasteful wooden base provided the perfect centerpiece surrounded by flowers in vases of the same gentle shade of green which the event’s Communication Director first chose as the primary color in the conference’s brand palette. This green was drawn from the color of the sapling plant held delicately in the hands of a faceless child estimated to be Aiden Campbell’s present earthly age and chosen as the conference’s logo. That shade of green was used in promotional materials, mailers, internet banner advertisements, brochures, signage at the event, backgrounds provided by the auditorium’s environmental projection background, and on the notebooks and facilities maps provided for each attendee. The experience was planned from the parking lot to the welcome table.

The conference planning team encouraged me to play guitar and sing an original song written for Aiden at some point in the final sessions, so the media team made the necessary accommodations. Finally, to encourage Aiden’s Hope attendees to experience more fellowship at HCC, and to allow those with Father’s Day plans to take their leave without missing content from the sermon curriculum, a question-and-answer session was offered before the final counseling time block on the final day of Aiden’s Hope, a Sunday following normal HCC worship services.

### **Description of the Follow-Up Period**

The post-survey, planned in both print and digital forms, was administered at the close of the sixth sermon and during the question-and-answer time following multiple gospel presentations throughout the conference, ushering in the follow-up period of weeks 12–20. When the seeds of the gospel have been sown, they often bear fruit! The church is to disciple new believers, and this curriculum hoped to yield such evangelistic

fruit. Therefore, Aiden’s Hope was not intended to be an isolated event living on only in posterity. Rather, measures to follow-up with those whose lives have been transformed were planned in good faith—in anticipation of expository preaching accomplishing precisely what expository preaching accomplishes.

So, the HCC member leading a series of new groups through the *GriefShare* curriculum on a biannual rotation was enlisted to plan the launch of his next curriculum cycle beginning the week following Aiden’s Hope. This way, parents attending Aiden’s Hope were able to immediately join the HCC *GriefShare* ministry and find community. For those who preferred to merge seamlessly with the book-by-book plan used at HCC through the cooperation of the *Explore the Bible* curriculum and the HCC sermon plan, extra *Explore the Bible Daily Discipleship Guides* were purchased as gifts for Aiden’s Hope attendees. This way, Aiden’s Hope parents were offered a clear “on-ramp” directly into the overall book-by-book plan of the church through new and existing small groups.

At the time of writing this ministry research project, the mechanism by which new guests join HCC is a free catered luncheon called “Discover Highlands.” The team responsible for Discover Highlands was prompted to give a special welcome to those who would come following Aiden’s Hope. Briefed on the curriculum, they were able to take special pastoral care of these bereaved parents, depending on whether or not said parents were new believers, direct them to an existing group using the *Explore the Bible* curriculum, or invite them to join with the *GriefShare* group which launched its new study shortly after that particular Discover Highlands luncheon.

At the time of writing this ministry research project, the weekly attendance of Highlands Community Church is 2,200 souls across six services and two campuses. A congregation of this size precludes me as the Lead Pastor at HCC from realistically offering personal discipleship to one tenth of one percent of the congregation. Even the lay leadership team over small groups is 600 people. However, the groups formed from Aiden’s Hope were intended to inevitably have a direct connection with the me as the

Lead Pastor. So, I implemented a workflow, which contained the contact information of attendees of Aiden’s Hope, to remind me to follow-up directly with them after the conference was over.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, if the missional application of the curriculum is to be realized, then the follow-up of the project would actually span a year’s time as those who were ministered to in Aiden’s Hope 2019 would become the lay ministry team of Aiden’s Hope 2020.<sup>3</sup> My wildest ambition for this curriculum is that it would grow each subsequent year from the first. In this inaugural iteration, I ministered to people using my son’s story. In the second iteration, those first ministered to would become ministers themselves and would then minister to others using their children’s stories. In the third iteration, those ministered to by the second “class” of Aiden’s Hope would be equipped to minister using their own children’s stories in the fourth iteration. Ultimately, the follow-up process for this project should outgrow me, keeping only the vestige of my son’s name and shedding even that, if necessary, over time. The gospel must become greater; I must become less. So, I planned the follow-up process with humble realism but also with the expectation that it could be scaled up in proportion to the Spirit’s limitless ability.

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<sup>2</sup> Contact information from Aiden’s Hope attendees was included into the church’s *Shelby Next* database. That each attendee was connected to HCC through Aiden’s Hope was indicated in each of their profiles so that future contact from the church could always take this into account, both for pastoral reasons and to ensure that we do not market to them and forsake their trust, having promised not to send them marketing emails upon their completion of the survey and registration for Aiden’s Hope.

<sup>3</sup> This ambition bars those with mental illness, or those found through background checks to be unqualified, from representing HCC in an official capacity this way.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### EVALUATION OF THE PROJECT

“What a beautiful legacy for Aiden,” my bride whispered to me, leaning her head on my shoulder as we looked out on the crowd of new friends in the fellowship hall lingering, laughing, and talking through their tears over half an hour after past the end of the time allotted for the final gathering of Aiden’s Hope. I asked the church’s Media Director how to power down the sound equipment so that his team could go home. We lingered another hour after that. A unique fellowship had ignited.

Highlands Community Church has grown in part because of this project. While the most significant factor is likely the scarcity of unflinching biblical exposition in the Pacific Northwest, multiple new families in the church have made it known to our team that Aiden’s Hope was their confirmation experience. At the time of writing, our church is reaching over two thousand people per weekend, up from the previous one thousand. God is using my son’s story by showing others how to use their bereavement as common ground with the bereaved in evangelism. People outside the church lose children too, but they lose their children without the gospel. However, there is hope. The ministry team of Aiden’s Hope is coming, and they bring the gospel with them.

#### **Evaluation of the Project’s Purpose**

The purpose of this project was to develop a gospel-centered resource to serve families who have suffered miscarriage and infant loss beginning with the bereaved parents of Highlands Community Church. Aiden’s Hope met an urgent need. Multiple parents traveled over one hour’s driving distance to attend the conference and commented on both the scarcity of conferences for bereaved parents and the novelty of a Bible-based

approach. There is, at the time of this project's writing, a large conference focusing on bereavement in the Seattle area; but, as is typical of the Seattle cultural context, it espouses a universalist approach. So, this ministry project's purpose was worthwhile given the bemoaned scarcity of such conferences. Moreover, the gospel-centered nature of the project was well-received by those in attendance. Multiple salvations have been attributed to the Spirit's work through the conference, a total of six families connected directly and indirectly to the project joined HCC, and the feedback indicated fruitfulness in the lives of attendees who already professed Christ before the conference. So, the project's purpose was not just worthwhile; it was both worthwhile and realized.

### **Evaluation of the Project's Goals**

The following four goals were set to determine the success of this ministerial endeavor. Having met these goals, HCC has been resourced to minister to bereaved parents. Moving forward, future iterations of Aiden's Hope and the planned publication of the content will resource other churches in the future.

1. Recruit parents bereaved by infant loss and miscarriage through a confidential survey that registered them for the study at HCC.
2. Develop a six-session curriculum on how the gospel gives hope to parents bereaved by infant loss and miscarriage.
3. Increase biblical and theological knowledge on infant loss and the gospel.
4. Gather proposed revisions to the curriculum.

This collective of goals represents a process whose ultimate aim was to lift up Jesus, who alone is able to heal the hearts of mourning parents. It has proven to be an asset to HCC and will hopefully bless future churches after publication.

#### **Goal 1: Recruit Parents through the Survey**

The survey appearing at the conference's registration page was cited through hearsay as the reason at least one potential conference attendee chose not to complete the

registration process at aidenshope.org. While the opening questions were largely innocuous, parents arrived at the questionnaire from marketing content that clearly indicated it came from a source regarding child loss. While it is impossible to know what visitors to this page did during the seconds they viewed the survey, the 74 percent bounce rate in the registration page's website analytics and the short amount of time spent by visitors to the page could indicate the abdications of partially completed surveys. Notification that counselors were available at the conference appeared at the conclusion of the survey (and elsewhere on aidenshope.org), but prospective conference attendees would have to have viewed the survey in its entirety to see the notification.<sup>1</sup>

However, the efforts to make bereaved parents aware of the conference's existence were successful in that, despite the survey, people unconnected with HCC attended. Hopefully, those who chose not to complete the survey will recognize the name of the conference when they encounter it in the future and find that a survey is no longer required. In either outcome, the practice of reviewing survey instrumentation has been a fascinating exercise for HCC staff, who wish to employ it in other ministry endeavors.

## **Goal 2: Develop a Curriculum for Bereaved Parents**

The original wording of this goal (“to recruit parents bereaved by infant loss and miscarriage . . .”) was challenged upon investigation of the survey results one month after opening registration for Aiden's Hope. Many of the attendees who completed the survey—the sixth question of which inquired as to whether the deceased child was lost before his or her first birthday—shared that their children were much older than one year of age (see appendix 1). So, knowing that the content would likely focus on the loss of

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<sup>1</sup> The notification at the base of the survey read, “*Licensed Therapists will be on-site with openings throughout the conference. You are invited to schedule free sessions with them (up to two sessions per couple) using the last 4 digits of your Social Security Number in the sign-up fields updated live at AidensHope.org*” (italics original).

infants and miscarriage as indicated by the survey and the marketing, some parents of deceased teenage children chose to attend.

**Parents of murdered children.** Despite the clear indicators in the marketing materials and the clear questions in the pre-curriculum survey, two mothers whose children were murdered attended Aiden's Hope. One child from Lynnwood was murdered by his mother's brother. The other child was murdered by his mother's husband. No pastoral ministry class in a Master of Divinity or Doctor of Ministry curriculum could anticipate such a bleak ministerial scenario. These mothers both had large social media followings as their children had been lost in recent years. Furthermore, in the case of the mother whose brother was convicted of the murder, a Facebook group to aid in the brief search for her child had amassed a large number of members. So, the highly focused nature of the project's marketing efforts was attuned by Facebook's algorithm to make this mother and her sister-in-grief far more likely to learn of Aiden's Hope than others. These two mothers, along with the father whose daughter passed at nineteen years of age and the parents of a daughter who passed at sixteen years of age, showed beautiful grace during the sermon from Matthew 18 on the eternal destination of infants. The pre-curriculum survey at least provided me with sufficient notice prior to the conference that parents of older children would attend.

The presence of these parents influenced a shift in the conference itinerary such that the first and second sermons were given in fluid and immediately adjacent concert with one another in an extended session. Though the project's original scope designed the curriculum to minister to the parents of late infants and babies lost through miscarriage, the biblical testimonies of Job and Naomi resonated all the more with the parents of older children. Job's children were grown, and Naomi's sons were married, when they died. While it is regrettable that the curriculum was not tailored to minister specifically to the parents of *murdered* children, it is at least a blessing that these parents

did not expect to receive counsel regarding the mourning of the one murdered. Rather, they expected to receive biblical counsel regarding the loss of children, and that is what they received.

The curriculum has proven most effective for the ministry context of HCC. Each session drove both believers and yet-believers to the gospel of Jesus Christ, in whom their only hope of ever seeing their children again waits. The two conversion testimonies from the Spirit's work through this expository curriculum testify that this goal was successfully met. Praise God for his gospel and the exquisite way it bears fruit.

### **Goal 3: Increase Biblical and Theological Knowledge**

The third goal of this project was to increase biblical and theological knowledge on infant loss and the gospel. This goal was measured by administering a Google Form post-curriculum survey completed by at least 25 attendees who also completed the pre-curriculum survey and measuring the change in biblical and theological knowledge. While some Google Form entries were dismissed due to errors, such as the same attendee registering for the conference twice, and while not all of the attendees completed the post-curriculum survey, 32 attendees gave admissible pre-curriculum and post-curriculum surveys. This is greater than the 25 entries required to successfully meet the goal. After the questions required for research approval, the survey instrument evaluated each attendee's knowledge of the curriculum's focal Scriptures. A t-test for dependent samples "involves a comparison of the means from each group of scores and focuses on the differences between the scores."<sup>2</sup> Since this project involved a single group of the same subjects being surveyed under two conditions, a t-test of dependent samples was the appropriate test statistic. This goal was successfully met

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<sup>2</sup> Neil J. Salkind, *Statistics for People Who (Think They) Hate Statistics*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2008), 191.

because the t-test for dependent samples demonstrated a positive statistically significant difference in the pre-curriculum and post-curriculum survey scores.

The teaching of doctrine to the select group of median adults made a statistically significant difference resulting in the increase of their doctrinal knowledge ( $t_{(9)} = 3.33^8$ ,  $p < .008$ ). The absolute value of the “t Stat” (-4.488091224) exceeds that of the “t Critical two-tail” (2.039513346), indicating that the teaching indeed made a difference in the recipients’ biblical and theological knowledge. The calculated probability of the test results, or “p value,” was  $9.25992 \times 10^{-5}$ , which amply accommodates the 5 percent margin for error and eliminates the null hypothesis. Thus, the difference between the pre-curriculum survey results and the post curriculum survey results was not due to chance, and it can be demonstrated that the biblical teaching rendered a positive statistically significant difference (see appendix 4).

#### **Goal 4: Gather Proposed Revisions to the Curriculum**

The final question of the survey instrument read, “Please, share any thoughts you have on how we can optimize this study,” followed by space in both the digital and print forms for open answers (see appendix 1). The pre-curriculum results provided the team with glimpses into the hearts of those to whom we would be ministering. The post-curriculum survey results provided both encouraging expressions of gratitude and apt examples of improvement opportunities. While this final question intentionally utilized the term “study” to encourage responses focused on the actual study itself, the majority of the free responses in the post-curriculum survey were given regarding the conference experience. Fortunately, the survey instrument’s Likert scale questions focus on the Bible teaching exclusively and show a positive variance between the two means. The pre-curriculum survey rendered a mean of 24.28125, and the post-curriculum survey rendered a mean of 28.625 (see appendix 4). This positive variance provides direction for the revision process (see appendix 5).

The responses regarding the conference are actionable revisions as well. There is theological significance to them. Processing grief in the context of community was of utmost value to the people of Aiden's Hope. A Bible-centered environment comprised of brothers and sisters in grief among whom they could use candor, express emotion freely, and answer with accuracy the question "How many children do you have?" was invaluable to these precious parents. These parents were unafraid to express their Christian belief in the context of a bereavement conference. Their open-text field responses are catalogued in table A9. From both the parents of Aiden's Hope and the staff involved, proposed revisions direct and indirect have been duly gathered (see appendix 6).

### **Strengths of the Project**

When the music from the transition video to launch the first sermon began to decrescendo, when my feet reached the third step from the platform, and when the strategically soft lights began to encompass the stage, I was struck by apprehension. I sensed the same apprehension in the eyes of the motley and reluctant parents who had assembled from across the region. The first promising response from the room came when I said of those who doubted whether their children were in heaven, "Even as a pastor, I do not have the authority to say that someone is *not* in heaven. Neither do you." Everyone shifted in their seats, several gave an audible response, and many gave affirming nods. The next promising response came when, though the aroma of delicious Mexican food had made its way into the auditorium, the parents remained at their "table times" enthralled in surprisingly boisterous discussion for more than fifteen minutes into the lunch hour. This was a clarion indicator to the Aiden's Hope team that the conference was on a trajectory toward objective success.

The greatest strength of the project was its fearless exposition of the Scripture. The people of HCC have come to expect expository preaching, but even those from

outside the church's network appreciated the biblical candor. When the sermon from 2 Samuel 12 came to a close, the altar was filled with parents confessing sin before God. They prayed precisely what David prayed when he was confronted by Nathan for the sin that prompted God to take his and Bathsheba's child. They prayed Psalm 51 to God. This strength was further affirmed by the spiritual fruit God bore through the conference. Two people professed Christ, and a total of six families joined HCC. Joining the church was never specifically called for in the responses offered through Aiden's Hope. Rather, three of these couples joined after attending Aiden's Hope and becoming acquainted with HCC through the conference's merging with the Saturday night service, and the other families joined after having heard of Aiden's Hope second-hand. The ways in which this conference contributed to HCC as a church constituted another strength. While some conference endeavors can be distracting from a church's overall mission and can eclipse or replace other regular functions of the host church, Aiden's Hope brought only life. In fact, in another wing of the building, one family hosted a memorial service with over three hundred people in attendance. This prompted a task for the Graphic Designers at HCC to produce aesthetically pleasing maps of the facility to distinguish where the memorial service was held from where the conference was held. That rendering of the building's blueprints proved favorable to the communications team, and so it led to just such a map being made available to all guests at HCC at the welcome station. This project was, true to the distinctive of the Doctor of Ministry program, designed in practicality for the mission of the church, and it has aided the mission of HCC.

This project accomplished precisely that which Ephesians 4:12 describes as the role of the teacher. It equipped these parents and the ministry teams involved with Aiden's Hope for the work of ministry. Not only were the members of the HCC staff who contributed to the logistics and administrative details of Aiden's Hope blessed to meet such a profoundly felt and scarcely addressed ministry need in our context, but also the attendees themselves were mobilized unto ministry.

Exhilarated by a compelling sense of purpose in gospel ministry inspired by the potential for their own children's testimonies to be used as gospel catalysts, the parents of Aiden's Hope were united by an electrifying culture. One would not expect to describe a room full of mourners as "electric," but that descriptor was used in the lobby by more than one attendee. This culture and its future implications for ministry are likely the second greatest strength of the project.

### **Weaknesses of the Project**

The original content outline called for a group recitation drawing from Psalm 34:18–20 that said, "My legs were not broken by this. I stood up again, and now I am here because I love my child. There is still life after this." This recitation phrase returned in later sessions altered to a Christologically fulfilled form: "Jesus' legs were not broken by the crucifixion. Jesus stood up again, and now Jesus is here because He loves His children. There is still life after this life!" As the parents arrived, it became apparent that two attendees who came from outside of the attendance records of HCC had physical mobility challenges. It was unclear just how physically capable one parent was of standing without aid. In fact, it could be reasonably speculated that his legs were broken at one point, thereby rendering our first recitation precisely contrary to his reality. So, I elected to forego this part of the sessions. These two parents were already risking their emotional dignity by attending a conference on their greatest source of pain. The risk that this recitation would incite further mental injury to what could be the second greatest source of pain while doing nothing to directly amend it was too great. So, it was omitted.

As was suspected during the curriculum preparation period, the sermon from Ruth required too much contextual background to fit within the time allotted for the sermon. Furthermore, with its extensive eschatological applications, it required too much time to fit within the theological scope allotted for the conference. The eschatological applications that drew parallels between Boaz at the city gate and Jesus taking the scroll

would have fit soundly in the context of another sermon and even undergirded the gospel connection of Ruth well, but, instead, it was delivered at a blistering pace. The conference's myriad interdependent factors, including paid counselors, musicians, a meal team, and an encroaching Saturday night service, encroached upon the time allotted for that particular sermon. The eschatological portion of the sermon distracted from the conference's overall focus. Boaz was not a bereaved parent. So, this sermon would have been more apropos had it focused more on Naomi's bereavement, redemption, and surrogate contribution to the messianic lineage.

Finally, I failed to provide clear direction for the second "table time." The first "table time" that exceeded its scheduled time slot allowed parents to tell their children's stories. The second, however, floundered for lack of clear direction.

### **What I Would Do Differently**

Cataloguing the weaknesses of this project prompts practical reflection but not merely for the sake of posterity. Rather, this project has already inspired an ongoing calendar event within the schedules and budget lines of HCC and may, after publication, be contextualized and used in other ministry contexts. So, having already met with the Aiden's Hope team to discuss improvements for Aiden's Hope 2020, it is quite directly applicable to consider what I would do differently.

As the feedback from the post-curriculum survey repeatedly suggests, I would revisit our approach to the "table time." I could not bring myself to ask that my team produce signs listing possible ways in which children could die and then place such horrific, albeit artistically beautiful, signs on tables. These signs including the words "miscarriage," "birth defect," "accident," or "medical malpractice" would be the first thing attendees noticed upon entering the HCC auditorium, and I could not abide the thought. So, instead, I hoped that God would sovereignly orchestrate table seating. While the first table time was remarkably well received, the second was not. Observing the

feedback, I would now have crafted poetic names to categorize the various types of loss. These delicately categorized groupings would also speak to the next alteration I would have made.

In 2020, Aiden's Hope will offer comprehensive conference tracks, and these tracks will have their own table times. These ministry tracks will have their own considerately crafted nomenclature which will become part of the language of Aiden's Hope. While the names of each track will be delicate, the marketing materials for the event will clearly explain each ministry track's focus:

1. A track in the tradition of Aiden's Hope for those who have lost children
2. A track specifically for those who struggle with infertility and miscarriage
3. A track for the parents of children with special needs
4. A track that coaches friends and family in ministering to bereaved parents

At the time of this project's writing, the conference call with his representation has not yet taken place, but the Aiden's Hope team will inquire of Christian music artist, published author, and bereaved parent Steven Curtis Chapman for his availability in 2020. Should he be available and willing, the dates, times, and even locations for Aiden's Hope would likely be altered to fit his daunting schedule. However, these accommodating measures are worth considering in light of the immense enhancement such an addition would bring to the project's mission.

In either case, whether Steven Curtis Chapman is included or not, the attendance projections for the next iteration of the project will need to be altered. In chapter 4, it was predicted that the number of registrations at three months prior to the implementation phase constituted one tenth of the projected total attendance. This estimate was incorrect. The number of registrations spiked significantly in the last week before the registration deadline, disproving the team's projections.

An aspect of registration and attendance projections that could either scale the

project significantly higher in its numerical reach, or could inhibit it greatly, is childcare. As a policy, HCC does not actually provide childcare in the traditional sense. Instead, HCC offers children's ministry. Thus, to adequately recruit and train a team of children's ministry leaders for the content that would coincide with what the children's parents are learning at Aiden's Hope 2020 would necessitate an accurate attendance projection. If the team had offered children's ministry for the inaugural iteration of the project, then several prospective attendees would have been able to attend. Even in my own household, my wife and I hired someone to care for our children at our home while we attended and ministered at Aiden's Hope.<sup>3</sup> Bereaved parents often have surviving children and "rainbow babies" who were born after the deaths of their older siblings. These children require childcare, and so offering ministry to these families would have tremendously increased the number of bereaved parents logistically able to attend Aiden's Hope. It would also have reduced the actual cost of the event for attendees. Beyond tuition for the conference, many also paid substantially in Washington gasoline prices for their long drives and in personal childcare stipends to those looking after their other children at home.

While this could not have been known at the time, and so would not technically classify as "what I would have done differently," the reflections shared by our therapists showed something surprising. Many of the parents had never spoken directly to a counselor, and so their sessions were devoted largely to exploring therapy itself rather than discussing their grief over their children's deaths. Had I been able to foresee this actuality, I would have enlisted our therapists with this warning expressed clearly from the outset.

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<sup>3</sup> On the eve of the first day, one exasperated mother was striving to find childcare, but she was not familiar with HCC. Our own childcare professional was looking after a considerable number of children as other staff members of HCC had left their children at our house so as to be free to focus on the event. This mother was, regrettably, unable to join Aiden's Hope due to lack of childcare.

While the tremendous response to this project has already secured its space in the calendar and budget of HCC for 2020, that same tremendous response tells of another weakness. I regret not having budgeted more aggressively in the marketing of the campaign. The email marketing campaign's "click-through rate," the social media marketing campaign's "engagement rate," and the search engine optimization's "acquisition rate" all indicated the public's longing for a ministry of this variety. David Newcomb stated that the social media posts for Aiden's Hope garnered more traffic organically than any previously "boosted" post in the history of HCC social media outreach. How many more might the team have reached?

In future years, the team will endeavor to find the apex of marketing spending for this event. We will experimentally find the zenith whereupon paying to inform more people of the conference's existence diminishes in its returns as measured by conference attendance. The only way to determine this figure is to overspend on marketing and then adjust spending appropriately the following year.

### **Theological Reflections**

I am grateful that this curriculum did not claim to have found definitive scriptural proof of the salvation of infants but only an interpretation that lends biblical hope to that glorious longing. Because Christianity in Seattle exists just beneath the bell of humanism's megaphone as it shouts liberal axioms eastward, the comparatively few Christians who live here tend to be skeptical by nature of anything advertised under the banner of Christianity. The contrast in Seattle is stark between the new believer who has never touched a Bible and the seasoned veteran of the faith who has been staunchly entrenched in Christian thought despite his or her surroundings for years. That contrast is most notable in the area of biblical literacy. When people find Christians in Seattle, they find biblically erudite scholars whose faiths have been refined in the crucible of debate with rocket scientists and software engineers. So, promises to have found that scriptural

proof for which they long would have instantly broken the fragile trust these bereaved parents barely held in the first with a supposedly Bible-based conference. Because the sermon including Matthew 18 advertised hope, and hope alone, it was able to deliver precisely that with full biblical confidence.

This decision helped to fabricate trust *ex nihilo*, and said trust enabled me to teach from 2 Samuel 12 with a voice of candor. The gospel-centered theme was readily apparent and obviously thematic by the time the curriculum arrived at 2 Samuel 12. Because each of the previous texts on bereavement had ended with a gospel connection, surely this one would as well. So, having been induced with a spiritual, almost Pavlovian, response to expect the gospel after hearing a sermon from a passage about bereavement, the parents were eager to hear the gospel and were sated when they did. Gospel centrality in expository preaching builds trust, protects both the preacher and the recipient alike, and allows even the Bible text which confirms the listener's fears to be taught and received with gratitude that leads to repentance.

### **Personal Reflections**

Aiden's death wounded me. In times of acute grief, I stumbled. However, that is not Aiden's legacy. There is more life in Aiden's legacy than death. For one, there are at least 152 people who have given their lives to Christ after hearing Aiden's story. For another, those in the medical community affiliated with the conference of surgeons to whom Aiden's doctors spoke no longer tell mothers of babies with Aiden's affliction to have an abortion. Rather, they tell those mothers that there is hope. Beyond even these, one couple was on the very precipice of committing mutual suicide, planning their last meal, when a notification from social media with Aiden's name caught the attention of the wife. The couple began to pray, the Holy Spirit rushed into their home, they gave their lives to Christ, reconciled with their grown children, and committed to the church across the street from their home. Beyond even *these*, Aiden's experimental medical care

gave rise to a clinical field trial that would lead to the use of 3D printers to produce tracheal implants that are soaked in the patient's own stem cells, planted into the body, and then allowed to grow with the body. This medical development has led to the saving of one life so far and, in Jesus's name, will save more. Militant atheists in my life, upon seeing the video of my eulogy for my son in which I proclaimed the gospel over his tiny casket, were drawn by the Holy Spirit and gave their lives to Christ. There is only one death in Aiden's story. There are countless lives. The lives impacted by Aiden's Hope add to the brightness of my son's legacy and God's work through it.

The fourth answer to the question "Why did my child die?" for my bride and me is this project. As we heard people weep together, laugh boisterously together, and let out electrifying rallying cries together, we see why our son died. He died so that people would be reconciled to God. This project has been cripplingly painful for me at times, but it has also been one of the means by which God has brought some degree of healing to my heart amid my grief for my boy. True to the thesis of chapter 3, I will use candor: were I given a choice between this beautiful ministry and the presence of my son back in my life, I would choose my son. However, in a New Testament imitation of David, I will go up to him, but he will not come down to me. So, instead, I endeavor to minister the hope and healing of the gospel of Jesus Christ to as many as I possibly can with my son's story. I do this because I have been commissioned to make disciples, and I do this because I am tasked with stewarding my son's story.

This project, and everyone who has been a part of it, has become, to me, a part of Aiden's story. His legacy lives on in the ministerial fruit born from God's use of it. As I commissioned the parents of Aiden's Hope to use their stories to share the gospel so that they might then understand their own children's deaths better, I was sending them about the very work I was doing in that moment. To lose a child is arguably the worst scenario in the human experience. To see God take even this darkest of scenarios and bring beautiful good from it, good that could not have otherwise come about, is a

redeeming experience in the gospel that may be appreciated by only those who believe the gospel. Indeed, the words of this project's final sermon resonate forever: "For our momentary light affliction is producing for us an absolutely incomparable eternal weight of glory. So we do not focus on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal" (2 Cor 4:17–18).

I am grateful to The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary for the incredible wisdom imparted to me, for helping to equip me for the pastorate, and for being forevermore a part of Aiden Isaiah Campbell's story. May God do immeasurably more than I could ask or imagine with this curriculum. May God inspire even more ministry in the hearts of my readers. Amen.

## APPENDIX 1

### BEREAVED PARENT SURVEY

**Thank you for participating. Thank you for helping us as we try to bring healing to other parents who are grieving the losses of their infants and unborn babies.**

Our hearts go out to you. The purpose of this survey is to gauge your understanding of the Bible's teachings on infant loss and miscarriage. This research is being conducted by Jesse Campbell for the purpose of developing a ministry curriculum and video series. In this research, you will answer questions before the six sessions and you will answer the same questions immediately after the sixth session. Any information you provide will be held strictly confidential, and at no time will your name be reported or identified with your responses. Participation is strictly voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time. By completion of this survey, you are giving informed consent for the use of your

Please, though it may be painful at times, answer the following questions by checking the box next to "Yes" or "No." Thank you again. You are a part of something important.

#### Part 1

1. Are you 18 years of age or older?

A. Yes

B. No

2. Do you consider yourself a Christian?

A. Yes

B. No

3. Have you repented of your sin and trusted in Jesus Christ for salvation?

A. Yes

B. No

4. Have you lost one (1) child to miscarriage?

A. Yes

B. Yes

5. Have you lost more than one child to miscarriage?

A. Yes

B. Yes

6. Have you had a baby who passed away before his or her first birthday?

A. Yes

B. Yes

7. What is your age in years?

A. 18–24

B. 25–34

C. 35–44

D. 45–54

E. 55–64

F. 65 and over

Thank you for your help. There are only a few more questions to go.

(1) Please, check one box by each of the following questions. (2) These questions ask you to give your opinion using the following scale: SD = strongly disagree, D = disagree, DS = disagree somewhat, AS = agree somewhat, A = agree, SA = strongly agree; please circle the appropriate answer.

**Part 2**

- |   |    |   |    |    |   |    |
|---|----|---|----|----|---|----|
| 8. I understand the Bible’s account of Job and can see why he trusted God despite his grief.        | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 9. I understand the story of the man who was born blind in the ninth chapter of John’s Gospel.      | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 10. I understand the story from 2 Samuel of David’s baby boy who died.                              | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 11. I can name at least one Bible passage that may indicate that babies go to heaven when they die. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 12. The story of Ruth shows how even bereavement was part of God’s salvation plan.                  | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |

Personal Identification Number: \_\_\_\_\_

**Text Field:**

Please, share any thoughts you have on how we can optimize this study:

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*Licensed Therapists will be on-site with openings throughout the conference. You are invited to schedule free sessions with them (up to two sessions per couple) using the last 4 digits of your Social Security Number in the sign-up fields updated live at [AidensHope.org](http://AidensHope.org).*

APPENDIX 2  
CURRICULUM EVALUATION RUBRIC

Table A1. Template for the curriculum evaluation rubric

<b>Infant Loss and Miscarriage Curriculum Evaluation Tool</b>					
<b>1= insufficient 2=requires attention 3= sufficient 4=exemplary</b>					
Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
The curriculum is clearly relevant to the issue of infant loss and miscarriage.					
The material gives regard to the Scripture's original intent and context.					
The material is theologically sound.					
The material is appropriately sensitive to the emotional sensitivity of its bereaved users.					
The material will increase the knowledge of the users.					
The curriculum contributes to the curriculum's overall gospel-centered approach.					
The curriculum is sufficiently thorough in its coverage of the Scripture.					
Overall, the curriculum is clearly presented.					

APPENDIX 3

COMPLETED EVALUATION RUBRICS  
PROVIDED BY EXPERT PANEL

Table A2: Professor from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

<b>Infant Loss and Miscarriage Curriculum Evaluation Tool</b>					
<b>1= insufficient 2=requires attention 3= sufficient 4=exemplary</b>					
Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
The curriculum is clearly relevant to the issue of infant loss and miscarriage.				X	Greatly needed material
The material gives regard to the Scripture's original intent and context.				X	
The material is theologically sound.				X	
The material is appropriately sensitive to the emotional sensitivity of its bereaved users.				X	Given my loss of a grandson, I find the lesson most helpful.
The material will increase the knowledge of the users.				X	
The curriculum contributes to the curriculum's overall gospel-centered approach.				X	This is a major strength of the work.
The curriculum is sufficiently thorough in its coverage of the Scripture.			X		It's a tough passage (maybe too insensitive), but Gen 22 shows Abraham trusting the life of his child to God (cf Heb 11:19).
Overall, the curriculum is clearly presented.				X	It is exceptionally written.

Table A3. Southern Baptist Senior Pastor with a Doctorate

<b>Infant Loss and Miscarriage Curriculum Evaluation Tool</b>					
<b>Lesson One Evaluation</b>					
<b>1= insufficient 2=requires attention 3= sufficient 4=exemplary</b>					
<b>Criteria</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>Comments</b>
The session is clearly relevant to the issue of infant loss and miscarriage.				X	
The material gives regard to the Scripture's original intent and context.			X		
The material is theologically sound.				X	
The material is appropriately sensitive to the emotional sensitivity of its bereaved users.				X	
The material will increase the knowledge of the users.				X	
The session contributes to the curriculum's overall gospel-centered approach.				X	
The lesson is sufficiently thorough in its coverage of the Scripture.				X	
Overall, the lesson is clearly presented.				X	

Table A4. Women’s Ministry Expert

<b>Infant Loss and Miscarriage Curriculum Evaluation Tool</b>					
<b>1= insufficient 2=requires attention 3= sufficient 4=exemplary</b>					
Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
The curriculum is clearly relevant to the issue of infant loss and miscarriage.				X	
The material gives regard to the Scripture’s original intent and context.				X	I appreciate that this is true of how you present biblical truth.
The material is theologically sound.				X	I so appreciate that you do not shy away from the hard passages of scripture
The material is appropriately sensitive to the emotional sensitivity of its bereaved users.				X	So important that the bereaved parent receives the proper calibration of grace and truth I appreciate the connection you make page 5 between Psalm 34:18 and John 19:33–37
The material will increase the knowledge of the users.				X	The material caused me to consider some things I had not before.
The curriculum contributes to the curriculum’s overall gospel-centered approach.				X	Love the correlation between Naomi and Ruth’s story and the connection to Christ/the gospel.
The curriculum is sufficiently thorough in its coverage of the Scripture.				X	
Overall, the curriculum is clearly presented.				X	I trust you will “layman’s language” when you present this material verbally during the session as I had to look up a couple of words in the dictionary so that I could fully appreciate the point you were trying to make.

Table A5: Neonatal Medical Professional

<b>Infant Loss and Miscarriage Curriculum Evaluation Tool</b>					
<b>1= insufficient 2=requires attention 3= sufficient 4=exemplary</b>					
Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
The curriculum is clearly relevant to the issue of infant loss and miscarriage.				X	
The material gives regard to the Scripture's original intent and context.				X	
The material is theologically sound.				X	
The material is appropriately sensitive to the emotional sensitivity of its bereaved users.			X		This is an area that is difficult for me to judge because of the academic nature of this paper. However, knowing Jesse's heart for the the bereaved parent(s), I can only imagine that he will present the material with the greatest of care.
The material will increase the knowledge of the users.				X	
The curriculum contributes to the curriculum's overall gospel-centered approach.				X	
The curriculum is sufficiently thorough in its coverage of the Scripture.				X	
Overall, the curriculum is clearly presented.				X	

APPENDIX 4  
 PRE-CURRICULUM AND POST-CURRICULUM  
 SURVEY DATA RESULTS

Table A6. T-test results from the pre-curriculum and post-curriculum survey responses

T-Test: Paired Two Sample for Means		
	<i>Pre-Test Total</i>	<i>Post-Test Total</i>
Mean	24.28125	28.625
Variance	32.91834677	2.887096774
Observations	32	32
Pearson Correlation	0.29904527	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	31	
t stat	-4.488091224	
P(T<=t) one-tail	4.62996E-05	
t Critical one-tail	1.695518783	
P(T<=t) two-tail	9.25992E-05	
t Critical two-tail	2.039513446	

APPENDIX 5

PRE-CURRICULUM AND POST-CURRICULUM  
SURVEY RESPONSES

Table A7. Pre-curriculum test results

Pre-Test Results						
Participant (Person)	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Pre- Test Total
1	6	6	6	5	6	29
2	6	6	6	5	6	29
3	3	4	3	3	4	17
4	3	4	3	3	4	17
5	6	6	6	4	6	28
6	6	6	6	4	6	28
7	5	5	5	5	5	25
8	4	3	2	1	2	12
9	5	5	5	4	4	23
10	5	5	5	4	4	23
11	1	1	1	1	1	5
12	6	6	6	6	6	30
13	5	4	4	6	6	25
14	6	6	6	5	6	29
15	6	6	6	6	6	30
16	5	5	5	5	5	25
17	6	6	6	3	6	27
18	5	5	4	2	5	21
19	6	6	6	6	6	30
20	6	6	6	6	6	30
21	6	5	5	6	5	27
22	5	6	5	4	6	26
23	6	6	5	6	6	29
24	6	6	5	6	6	29
25	5	4	5	6	4	24
26	6	5	5	4	5	25
27	1	1	2	6	6	16
28	5	5	5	5	5	25
29	5	5	5	5	5	25
30	4	6	5	4	5	24
31	4	6	5	4	5	24
32	4	4	4	4	4	20

Table A8. Post-curriculum test results

Post-Test Results						
Participant (Person)	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Pre-Test Total
1	6	5	6	6	6	29
2	6	6	6	5	6	29
3	6	4	6	6	6	28
4	5	5	4	5	6	25
5	6	6	6	6	6	30
6	5	6	6	5	6	28
7	6	6	6	6	6	30
8	6	5	6	4	5	26
9	5	4	4	6	6	25
10	6	6	5	5	6	28
11	6	6	6	6	6	30
12	6	6	6	6	6	30
13	5	5	6	6	6	28
14	6	6	6	6	6	30
15	6	6	6	6	6	30
16	6	6	6	5	6	29
17	6	6	6	4	5	27
18	5	4	5	6	5	25
19	6	6	6	6	6	30
20	6	6	6	6	6	30
21	5	6	6	5	6	28
22	6	6	5	6	6	29
23	6	6	6	6	6	30
24	6	6	6	6	6	30
25	6	6	6	6	6	30
26	6	6	5	5	5	27
27	6	6	6	6	6	30
28	6	6	6	6	6	30
29	6	6	6	6	6	30
30	5	6	6	6	6	29
31	5	6	5	5	5	26
32	6	6	6	6	6	30

APPENDIX 6

POST-CURRICULUM SURVEY OPEN  
RESPONSES TO THE STUDY

Table A9: Unedited responses to the open-text field question  
in the post-curriculum survey

Respondent	Response
Respondent 1	This conference exceeded all my expectations. I was able to share things for the first time. I fell like a weight has been lifted! Thank you!! Praise God!!
Respondent 2	There are no curses that can overcome/overthrow God's plans for our lives! The story of Ruth tested my faith.
Respondent 3	I liked the amount of "table time" and that it was not too structured, but maybe 1-2 specific discussion questions could have guided us more. I always love the change to share my story. It's so meaningful with other believers.
Respondent 4	I have seen many tears today and many have been strengthened and are hopeful just going forward. Wonderful teaching. Blessings.
Respondent 5	Thank you.
Respondent 6	During the 2nd table talk I was with Jessi [the author's bride] & she led w/2 questions. 1) What's your story & 2) how can we pray for you. Having lead questions like this would have been nice during the 1st round. Thank you so much!
Respondent 7	Had lunch with you and confessed we lied on our questionnaire.

Respondent	Response
Respondent 8	Pre-prayer team for participants Big boxes of tissues 😊 It was really great guys. Thank you so much!
Respondent 9	It was <u>so so</u> good. Wouldn't change a thing! God Reigns! He really spoke through this!
Respondent 10	Need to think about it, very emotionally and spiritually exhausting day – but in a good way.
Respondent 11	Maybe more space/permission for those who are still struggling to believe/still grieving. I already feel so guilty for not being faithful as I should be and a way to follow-up or resources.
Respondent 12	One of the table leaders hadn't lost a child and talked too much – giving advice. All participants should be able to empathize. GREAT CONF!
Respondent 13	What a great way to share life with someone who lost a child. But mainly the hope in Jesus.
Respondent 14	Idea: schedule one table time session that is assigned with people experiencing similar situations (ie. If you lost a baby, go to room 350). Overall – Amazing Conference!
Respondent 15	Thank you. We were blessed to be able to share our story with others who have lost a child. That is where true understanding resides.
Respondent 16	Good format. Good time use. Thanks for the meals.
Respondent 17	I thought it was terrific & inspired. Perhaps adding a portion on working through anger with God would've been helpful.
Respondent 18	This was amazing. Thank you so much for putting this conference on and for sharing Aiden's story with the world. How beautiful!!! We would like to connect with you and deepen our relationship.

Respondent	Response
Respondent 19	Create more structured table time. Most people shared their stories during the 1st table time. So 2nd table time needed questions to talk thru.
Respondent 20	We were a table captain. The 1st table time was great. It would like to have more structure to the 2nd table time. Perhaps giving questions like, “how do you deal w/ guilt?” or “what would you do differently if you (or someone else) were presented with the same situation?” I also would like more paper take aways with conference material and verses.
Respondent 21	This was a beautiful time and we are thankful for you heart and sharing your story. We wish we could be there tomorrow.
Respondent 22	More guidance on the 2nd table time. We did most of our stories in the 1st table time, so floundered somewhat in the 2nd one.
Respondent 23	Today was amazing. Me and my husband left uplifted and at peace, something we didn't for a while now. Thank you for bringing the Bible in such a new context to us, I don't think we would be able to find so many answers to our question at any other conference/church, your story truly started an unique ministry. Thank you for letting God speak through you and use you to give peace to our family and I'm pretty sure so much more people. Thank you.

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## ABSTRACT

### RESOURCING MEMBERS OF HIGHLANDS COMMUNITY CHURCH, RENTON, WASHINGTON, TO MINISTER TO BEREAVED PARENTS

Jesse Austin Campbell, D.Min.  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2019  
Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Michael E. Pohlman

The gospel of Jesus Christ is the only meaningful hope to be offered parents bereaved by infant loss and miscarriage. A curriculum of six sermons delivered in the medium of a conference expositing passages on child loss may resource the church to minister to the bereaved. This project takes a Christ-centered hermeneutic to passages throughout Scripture including 2 Samuel 12 that share the gospel with unsaved bereaved parents while discipline Christian bereaved parents. Answers to the question, “Why did my child die?” are offered from Scripture and qualified hope for the salvation of infants is presented from Matthew 18. The curriculum then turns to mobilize the bereaved parents and equip them to minister to other bereaved parents with this hope that is found only through Jesus Christ, finding some degree of healing for their hearts and finding a sense of redeemed purpose in the deaths of their children.

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B.M., The Florida State University, 2007

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### PUBLICATIONS

*Milestones: Connecting God's Word to Life*. Nashville: LifeWay, 2019.

*The Battle Plan for Prayer*. Nashville: B & H, 2015.

*I'm a Christian—Now What?* Nashville: B & H, 2014.

*What It Means to Be A Christian*. Nashville: B & H, 2014.

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*Epic Love*. Little Rock, AR: Borderstone Press, 2012.

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Student Pastor, Heritage Baptist Church, Cantonment, Florida, 2007–2010

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