



The Loss of a Child: Bearing One Another's Burdens

Bible Study
Leader's Guide

[**Please provide:** copies of this study, Bibles, hymnals, and musical accompaniment (if available)]

Sing: "Children of the Heavenly Father," LSB 725

Opening Prayer: Almighty Father we know that ultimately You are in control and work for the good of those who love You. There are those Christian sisters among us who are hurting because of the loss of their precious child or children. You know their hurt as You gave Your only Son as the atoning sacrifice on the cross. Please send the Holy Spirit to work through us, to overcome our timid behaviors so we may care for these mourning mothers by showing Christ's comforting love to them. In Christ's most precious Name we pray. Amen.

Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2).

This is the theme verse for this Bible study. In this study, we will look in-depth at how we as "women in the pew" can fulfill the law of Christ by helping to bear the burdens of those mothers who have lost a child through miscarriage, stillbirth, or infant death. We will also examine Bible accounts that are wonderful examples of Christ which teach us how to bear one another's burdens and how to deal with grief.

Grief

Write down a description of what grief has looked like for you personally. Encourage participants to share their personal descriptions without comment or judgment.

Types Of Child Loss

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC): Miscarriage is the loss of a baby before the 20th week of pregnancy. Stillbirth is the loss of a baby after 20 weeks of pregnancy. Infant death is the loss of a baby after birth.

The Grief From Losing A Child

Several different mothers put grieving the loss of their child as this: "...the loss of many hopes and dreams."-Johanna B. "I had random moments where the feelings would hit me such as when I was helping my young niece and nephew get ready for bed one night. The whole time I kept wondering what it would have been like to put that child to bed and read stories etc., and would I ever have that chance...the grief never goes away completely though..."-Kathryn D. "After losing a child, you eventually get back to 'normal' life, but you are never the same again."-

Tiffany R. "I feel like the grieving process takes over your whole life. It can be very debilitating...I would try to pull myself together, but often times, grief would erupt anyway."-Allison H.

Explanation Of Grief

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, MD, in her book titled, *On Death and Dying*, breaks down grief into five stages:

Stage 1: Denial and Isolation

Stage 2: Anger

Stage 3: Bargaining

Stage 4: Depression

Stage 5: Acceptance.

Kubler-Ross explains in her book that each grieving person goes through each stage, but the order in which an individual may go through them is unique to each person. She goes on to explain that even though someone may have reached the acceptance stage, she may revert to other stages again at any given time. Also, a person can even go through several of the stages all at once. (Kubler-Ross, Elisabeth, *On Death and Dying: What the Dying Have to Teach Doctors, Nurses, Clergy, and Their Own Families*, ©1969 by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, MD. Forward ©2015 by Ira Byock, MD. Published by Scribner, a division of Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020, 1-800-897-7650 (Option 3).

Keep in mind that no two people are alike and that every person grieves differently. It is beneficial to remember these stages when talking to and/or comforting a mother who has just lost her child since they will be present in one form or another. It is good to remind her during this time that a mother's grief is perfectly natural. Also keep in mind when listening to others tell their story what the mother above shared, "the grief never goes away completely..." We can't put expectations or timelines on someone's healing process. Rather we are instructed by Jesus to *bear one another's burdens*, especially through the grieving process.

Grief In The Bible

Read John 11:1-44. How did Jesus show emotion when Lazarus died? Jesus wept (v. 35) upon seeing Mary weeping and the Jews that were with her also weeping.

From the Lazarus account, what can we learn from Jesus concerning grief? It is natural to show emotions (e.g., sadness expressed through crying) at the loss of someone. Jesus showed His human nature during this event by His tears and sorrow, and by His show of empathy to Mary and Martha.

How did Jesus care for Lazarus' sisters, Mary and Martha? Jesus spoke comforting words to Mary and Martha. He shared with Martha the ultimate comfort for a Christian, that He is the "resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die" (vv. 25-26). Jesus was also present there with the two grieving sisters.

As we remember what Jesus did for Mary and Martha, how can we care for those experiencing grief around us? Encourage women to share their ideas with the rest of the group. Some specific ways will be shared later in the Bible study.

Sympathy Versus Empathy

Sympathy: to feel concern for someone else without becoming involved in his or her life.

Empathy: to feel another's problems as if they were your own without actually taking them on yourself. (*Stephen Ministry Training Manual*, by Stephen Ministry, ©2000, p. 33.)

For a mother who has just lost her baby, to show empathy is far more effective than being sympathetic. Mothers have expressed that just having a concerned person with them to give them a hug, to sit with them, and to let them know they are not alone is far more effective than simply saying some well-meaning words.

One such mother shared, "I remember sitting on the couch, feeling dry, feeling as though I had no more tears to cry. When my friend walked in, she grabbed me in a hug and kissed my cheek. She was crying, crying for me and for our loss."-Claire K.

Another mother said, "We had a (church) member who really disliked me, and the first thing she did was envelope me in a hug. It's something that will stick with me forever-that even our normal disagreements temporarily melt in tragedy."-Genevieve W.

To show empathy is to be involved in another person's care. It's not just saying something nice hoping it helps. To show empathy is to care for someone through actions. Jesus is the prime example of an empathetic person. On multiple occasions in the Bible, Jesus deliberately stepped out to care for people who needed care the most. He is our true example on how to care and empathize with our neighbor.

Reflect on each instance below and describe how Jesus shows true empathy rather than sympathy.

Luke 19:1-10: Jesus showed empathy through His action. He sought out Zacchaeus and spent time with him. Jesus didn't just tell him well-meaning words and walk away. Jesus went into Zacchaeus' home and spent time with him.

John 4:1-44: Jesus took the time to teach the Samaritan woman at the well the truth that He is the Savior. He spent time with this woman who was considered an outcast in her society because of her behavior. Jesus did not look at this woman as an enemy because of her race. Instead, Jesus loved her and cared for her spiritual life. Jesus knew she needed His care.

John 8:1-11: This account is another example of Jesus' care for those with whom no one else wanted to deal. Like the story of the Samaritan woman at the well, this Bible account shows Jesus' care and concern for women, who at that time in history had few, if any, rights in society. No one wanted to interact with the woman caught in adultery, other than to punish her. All present except for Jesus despised her and wanted to stone her. But Jesus took the time to speak with her and to lead her to repentance. Jesus also pointed out the sinful nature of those around her which shows His concern for the spiritual life of all people.

Mark 2:1-12: This Bible account is but one of many in the Scriptures where Jesus shows loving action to those who are outcasts because of a physical condition. Other than his four friends who took him to Jesus, most people in society at that time wouldn't even look at this man who was paralyzed. But Jesus saw him, spoke to him, forgave his sins, and healed his physical difficulties.

Luke 23:16-24:12: The account of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection is the ultimate example of taking on the burdens of others. Jesus loves us so much that He suffered and died in our place. He bore the punishment we deserved for our sins when He took the burden of all our sins upon Himself. Through faith in Him, our sins are forgiven and we have spiritual life for eternity.

What are some fears you may have about comforting a mother who has just lost a child?
Encourage individuals to share fears they may have.

If you have known a grieving mother in your past where you didn't feel equipped and didn't empathize with her, take heart: you are forgiven. Jesus forgives us all through His death and resurrection from the grave.

The following is a compilation of experiences shared by mothers and family members who have lost children. These are meant to be a resource for "women in the pew" to comfort mothers who have lost children.

Responses From Grieving Women Which Address Three Common Fears Of "Women In The Pew"

Fear 1: I will make this mother sad by asking about her child.

Response: This is a common misconception as one mother stated, "The fear is always that you make the mother sad if you mention their child. Mom is already sad, even if she's not showing it all the time. You might be giving her permission to show it, but you're not making her sad. Just be willing to witness her tears with a hand squeeze or hug and be there."-Genevieve W.

Fear 2: I will get in the way of her and her grieving.

Response: One mother said, "I know I felt lost, like nobody else had gone through what I had."-Michelle W. "Sitting through Mother's Day services and All Saints' Day services were the hardest. Two of my close friends saw how upset I was and they came to comfort me in the service. God provided comfort to me through these friends when I needed it the most."-Melissa A.

Fear 3: I wouldn't be of any help because I never experienced the loss of a child, I wouldn't understand.

Response: Another mother answered, "I think actually asking me questions would be nice. I often don't share as much as I could because I am afraid of making people feel uncomfortable. A lot of time just asking how they can help will open the door to either telling them nothing or maybe just to pray, but would also open that door to share more."-Laura V.

How might these responses to fears calm your own fears as you approach mothers who are grieving? The responses of these mothers show that your loving presence and kind questions are welcome.

What are some actions you could take to show empathy to a mother who just lost her child? As participants share ideas, have them reflect again on the ways in which Jesus showed empathy to those in grief and in need. Jesus met the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of those who were hurting. By the power of the Holy Spirit, He works in us today to feed, comfort, love, and share His saving and life-giving Word with grieving mothers.

Effective Ways To Show Empathy And Comfort To A Grieving Mother

The mothers interviewed in preparation for this Bible study shared some very helpful ways that “women in the pew” can comfort and tend to grieving mothers.

1. The most common recommendation is to bring meals to them. The last thing a mother is thinking about is caring for herself physically during the initial stages of grief, let alone cooking. So organizing home cooked meals from various church members for several weeks, not days, that are delivered to their home would be a great help. As one mother shared, “No one knows what to say or what to do when your baby dies, but everyone knows how to make a casserole or have a restaurant deliver food...For a full six weeks after our daughter died, I didn’t have to worry about dinner. If I needed to spend the afternoon sleeping or crying or a combination of the two, I didn’t have to worry about whether or not my family would be fed. Those meals were invaluable in my healing process.”-Tiffany R.

2. Provide child care for their other children (if they have other children) while they have to make funeral arrangements, or just a day to themselves to grieve. Many mothers said people offered to take their children, but when they asked later on the people who offered never followed through. Please make a valiant effort to follow through. Making non-genuine offers and not following through can feel like jabs to the mother in mourning. They will cause feelings of anger, severe loneliness, and bitterness. “We had lots of offers for ‘if you ever need anything...’ which we tried to take people up on but it never worked out-that would be the one down-side, because the grieving doesn’t stop when the funeral ends, and sometimes parents need a day to take care of themselves.”-Genevieve W.

3. Just give them a hug and not say a word. Personally seek out the mother to give her the hug. Share tears with the mother over her loss. By just your physical presence, you are giving support even if you do not say anything. Over and over again, the mothers interviewed shared they did not remember much of what anyone said to them right after their loss, or who sent them cards/letters, but they distinctly recall who was there for them and who gave them hugs. Actions speak so much louder than words--actions speak to the heart. “I also think just simple hugs were helpful for me. There were a few ladies at church that came up and just hugged me and didn’t even have to have a lot of words to say. The hug was nice!”-Allison H.

4. Speak of their child. This is an extremely hard thing for people to do, especially if they have never lost a child. But ask about their child, Call their child by their name, if the parents named him or her. Acknowledgment that their child existed is very important. Laura V. states when asked how she keeps her child’s memory alive, “The way I do this the most is by sharing with people that I lost a child. I feel like so many people hide it, and I want people to be comfortable sharing this loss.” “After my son, Henry, passed away, the thing that hurt the most was when I started talking about my son and someone would ignore him by changing the topic or not acknowledging he existed. Our child existed and was very much alive, so please do not act as though he did not. Our children are created by God and are now with God.”- Melissa A. Also marking down on a calendar their child’s date of birth and/or expected due date so you can remember them in the future and let the grieving mother know you remember on those very hard days. Let her know she is not alone.

5. Say a simple prayer with the mother. One mother stated, “Words of prayer, I feel like would be most appropriate.”-Sarah B.

6. If a mother does not feel comfortable sharing about her child the first time you ask, it is ok. Just gently try again after some time is given for her to heal. “I had a church member who persistently harshly asked how I was doing and tried to pump me for more details every time I

saw her. Once she conveyed that I had grieved long enough and I should be thinking of having other children. This made me feel uneasy and unwilling to share. If she had been more gentle in her way of communicating with me I would have been more willing to share our story with her. But because of her harsh nature I clammed up and didn't share anything with her. I felt as if she was putting a time line on my grieving. This poor form of communication from her caused me to feel significant feelings of remorse and anger."- Melissa A.

Closing Prayer: Heavenly Father, we thank you for giving Your Son as the ultimate example of bearing our burdens through His death on the cross and resurrection from the grave. Please help us use what we have learned and take this knowledge to heart, so that we may love our neighbors as ourselves and be able to empathetically bear one another's burdens. May the Holy Spirit fill our hearts and give us the actions to minister to the grieving mothers we may know or will know and so fulfill the law of Christ. In His most precious Name we pray. Amen.

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