

The Scriptures on Abortion

Douglas C. Heimburger, M.D.

Dr. Heimburger is Associate Professor of Nutrition Sciences and Medicine at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, Alabama.

In the midst of the battle to regain rights for preborn children, Christians should be well grounded in the Scriptures that inform the issue. Though it is not exhaustive, it is hoped that the following annotated list of Scriptures will be of help. The Bible does not explicitly mention abortion, but at least five general subjects it deals with are pertinent, and therefore constitute the basis for my selection of passages. These are the biblical definition of a person; passages on the image of God; Scriptures related to children; exhortations regarding orphans; and finally, how we should view hardship and affliction. The list is intended as a study aid, and should be read with Bible in hand.

What Constitutes A Person?

The Scriptures refer to pre-born children in the same way they refer to adults. To be a person does not require any particular station or function, but apparently only that one be conceived. Further, according to the Bible personhood involves more than biological existence. It entails a relationship to God by virtue of his plan and his covenants, and includes a spiritual and moral dimension.

Jer. 1:5 - "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations." The plan of God for a person - if you will, a person's relationship to him - precedes even conception.

Ps. 139:13-16 - "You knit me together in my mother's womb. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be." The use of

personal pronouns for the pre-born child implies personhood rather than some sort of potential personhood. It was David himself, and not his shadow, that was forming in his mother's womb. Other similar passages include Job 31:15; Ps. 22:9,10; Isa. 42:2,24; and Isa. 49:5.

Ps. 51:5 - "Surely I have been a sinner from birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me." This aspect of a person's nature, in addition to the many characteristics programmed into the genes, are present from the time of conception rather than acquired later.

Luke 1:39-44 - Verses 41 and 44 indicate that at Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in Elizabeth's womb. There is no distinction in the biblical language between the unborn and born child; the same word applies to both. The idea that one becomes "human" at any stage later than conception (such as by receiving a "soul" at birth) is not biblical.

Ex 21:22-25 - This important passage demands retribution for damage to a pregnant mother or her unborn child during a fight between two men. The noun in v. 22 ("her fruit depart", NASV) is the Hebrew for "child", so the passage should be translated as in the NIV, "she gives birth prematurely". The event described, therefore, involves premature birth rather than miscarriage, and "the contrast in vv. 22-23 would appear to be between those instances when no damage has come to either mother or child (v. 22) and where damage has come to mother, child, or both (v.23)" (Walter Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Ethics*, p. 172). The forming child is treated as a person by this application of the *lex talionis* (eye for eye, tooth for tooth, etc.)

The Image of God

Gen 1:26, 27;5:1-3 - "God created man in his own image." These are the foundational passages declaring that the uniqueness of man inheres in his creation in God's image. Man is peerless because God, in the act of creating him, declared him to be so, and grounded it in the impartation of his image. Gen 5:1-3 suggests that this image is somehow passed from one human to another through procreation. This implies that any offspring begotten by a human, regardless of how impaired, carries the image of God, and is human.

Gen 9:5,6 - "From each man I will demand an accounting for the life of his fellow man. Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man." The prohibition against murder (the Hebrew here refers specifically to murder, not to killing in general) is based on the *imago Dei*. Because man bears the image of God, to shed his blood is to defy God and to incur punishment. God demands an accounting of us for the lives of our fellow men. We are therefore accountable for the lives of pre-born children and the debilitated elderly, as much as any other life, since to be pre-born or debilitated does not erase the image of God.

Children

In the biblical view, children are worthy of the full respect due to any person; the lack of a distinction between the pre-born and born child extends this to the pre-born as well.

Gen. 17:7,8; 26:3-5 - "I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come." God's covenant promises extend to future generations, which necessarily include children.

Ps. 127:3-5 - Children are "a heritage, a reward from the Lord; blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them."

Prov. 17:6 - "Children's children are a crown to the aged."

Matt. 19:13,14 - "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." Luke 9:48 - "Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me . . . For he who is least among you all - he is the greatest." In addition to reflecting the importance of children to Jesus, this passage also opens the general subject of the biblical view of those who are considered "least" among men: this includes children, orphans, widows, and persons who are poor, oppressed, or afflicted.

Orphans

The biblical commands regarding not oppressing but showing mercy to orphans and widows represent how we should treat disadvantaged people: they should be preferentially protected and helped, taking as a model the grace of God toward us. The definition of "disadvantaged" varies in different ages and cultures, but can be generalized to include anyone whose voice on his or her own behalf tends not to be heard or heeded; in essence, any group that lacks social or political power. On two accounts this includes pre-born children: they are socially and politically powerless, and they often have no parents who want them. Therefore, the biblical injunction to protect orphans and other disadvantaged persons applies poignantly to the unborn, making abortion on demand out of the question. Inasmuch as children with genetic defects are even more disadvantaged, they qualify yet more.

Ex 22:22-24 - "Do not take advantage of a widow or an orphan. If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry. My anger will be aroused, and I will kill you with the sword; your wives will become widows and your children fatherless." Denying orphans justice is a sure way to arouse God's wrath!

Deut. 24:17-22 - "Do not deprive the alien or the fatherless of justice." The passage says this includes leaving some of the harvest in the field for them, unselfishly giving them opportunities to provide for themselves. Since aliens and orphans can't make us fear the consequences of oppressing them, God uses another angle: "remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there. That is why I command you to do this." One might

paraphrase this to say, "remember that you too were once unborn children." He provided for the people of Israel in Egypt, and for us in the womb, through grace, not because we or they deserved or could demand anything from him.

Ps. 10:14-18 - God is the helper and defender of the fatherless and the oppressed. Whom he defends, we should defend.

Ps. 27:10 - "Though my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will receive me." How could a father and mother more utterly forsake a child than to kill it before it is even born?

Ps. 94:6 - The wicked and the proud "murder the fatherless."

Isa. 1:10-28 - In this context God is pronouncing judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah (and other rebellious nations) not just for their oft-cited sexual perversions, but for their empty "multitude of sacrifices" (v. 11) and "meaningless offerings" and incense which are "detestable" to God (v. 13) *because of the breaches of justice* within them. These breaches include the rulers' being "rebels, companions of thieves," taking bribes, and *failing to defend the orphans and widows* (v. 23). Because of this God says he will turn his hand against them (w. 24,25), purge the evildoers, and restore justice (w. 26,27). Instead, we are enjoined to "seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow" (v. 17). This passage and others, such as Jer. 5:28, condemn not only those who actively oppress the helpless, but *those who fail to take an active role in pleading the case of the helpless before others*.

Isa. 10:1,2 - "Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of their rights and rob my oppressed people of justice, making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless." These Isaiah passages clearly describe the posture of American law and culture toward the preborn, after *Roe v. Wade*.

Jer. 7:5-8; 22:3-5 - The "shedding of innocent blood" is classified along with oppressing the fatherless, alien, and

widow. Those who do this will "become a ruin," but those who refrain will be blessed.

Jas. 1:27 - The New Testament reaffirms the importance of "looking after orphans and widows in their distress," making it an essential element of righteousness.

Affliction

The previous Scriptures call on us to help others who are afflicted and oppressed. What about when we or our own children are afflicted? Some abortions are rationalized because the baby has genetic abnormalities, which might be considered afflictions. The following Scriptures show that affliction in the Biblical worldview carries meaning, though this meaning may be hidden from us. We can be certain that afflictions, including birth defects, are intended to demonstrate aspects of the character of God, such as his power and grace, and to sanctify us, producing fruits such as holiness, righteousness, peace, humility, and dependence upon God. In this context, the abortion of infants with birth defects ignores the beneficent, sovereign will of God in affliction, pre-empts the opportunity to see accomplished his greater (though perhaps hidden) purposes, and misses the blessing he promises to those who love and obey him. Opting for "perfection" by dispensing with "defective" infants, we miss the chance to see God heal and bind up our wounds, "producing a harvest of righteousness and peace."

Ex 4:11 - When Moses complained to God regarding his slowness of speech, God said, "Who gave man his mouth? Who makes him deaf or dumb? Who gives him sight or makes him blind? Is it not I, the Lord?" Moses' speech impediment was a dispensation of God, possibly at birth. God had plans to use Aaron to compensate for it, plans known only to him at the time.

Deut. 28:1-68 - Some affliction, though not all, represents judgment for disobedience. And not all judgment is individual and personal some is collective. This passage chronicles in great detail all sorts of affliction and disaster that will befall nations that disobey God. On the other hand, obedience to his commands results in blessings across the board: in city and country;

of offspring, crops, and livestock; of basket and kneading trough (food?); and when one comes in and goes out. While the previous chapter proclaims curses on the *individual* who "withholds justice from the alien, the fatherless or the widow kills his neighbor secretly . . . [or] accepts a bribe to kill an innocent person" (27:19,24,25), chapter 28 indicates that disobedient *societies* incur *national* judgment. Even if we as individuals have not participated in abortions, we are members of a nation that has dishonored the righteous God, and we may share the consequences.

Deut. 32:39 - "There is no God besides me. I put to death and I bring to life. I have *wounded and I will heal*, and no one can deliver from my hand." Some wounds are inflicted and some birth defects given in order that God's healing power and grace can be demonstrated. Cf. Job 5:17,18, "he wounds, but he also binds up; he injures, but his hands also heal." For us to prevent the birth of an afflicted life is to presume tragically upon the sovereignty of God.

Job 1:21 - Upon hearing that his possessions had been destroyed, job said, "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised." Though he became quite despondent later, at this point he exhibited a proper motive (the glory of God), an important element in a Biblical ethic regarding affliction.

Heb. 12:7-11 - "Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons . . . God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it." On an individual level, we can see defect, affliction, and hardship as part of the discipline that God dispenses for our good, to produce holiness in us, and not necessarily as punishment. In fact, such discipline is a mark of our legitimacy as God's sons!

Summary

Taken together, the passages cited comprise a forceful biblical argument against abortion on demand. Since God holds us accountable to intervene on behalf of the

victims of injustice, we cannot be both silent and faithful. Prov 24:11-13 makes this clear: "Rescue those being led away to death; hold back those staggering toward slaughter. If you say, 'But we knew nothing about this,' does not he who weighs the heart perceive it? Does not he who guards your life know it? Will he not repay each person according to what he has done?"