

When a Child Dies: Responses From Church History

Steve Burchett

What follows are the honest and courageous words of four well-known Christians from the past regarding the loss of a child—a much more common occurrence in previous centuries, but still a reality today.

Ann Judson (missionary Adoniram Judson's first wife), after the death of their second child:

“Our hearts were bound up in this child; we felt he was our earthly all, our only source of innocent recreation in this heathen land. But God saw it was necessary to remind us of our error, and to strip us of our only little all. O may it not be vain that he has done it. May we so improve it, that he will stay his hand and say, ‘It is enough.’”¹



George Whitefield, in a letter to a friend, after the death of his son whom he assumed would grow up and become a great preacher of the gospel:

“Who knows what a day may bring forth? Last night I was called to sacrifice my Isaac, I mean to bury my only child and son about four months old. Many things occurred to make me believe he was not only to be continued to me, but to be a preacher of the everlasting gospel. Pleased with the thought, and ambitious of having a son of my own, so divinely employed, Satan was permitted to give me some wrong impressions, whereby, as I now find, I misapplied several texts of Scripture. Upon these grounds I made no scruple of declaring, ‘that I should have a son, and that his name was to be John.’ I mentioned the very time of his birth, and fondly hoped that he was to be great in the sight of the Lord...

I thought best to send both parent and child to Abergavenny . . . In their journey thither, they stopped at Gloucester, at the Bell-Inn . . . There, my beloved was cut off with a stroke. Upon my coming here, without knowing what had happened, I enquired concerning the welfare of parent and child, and by the answer, found that the flower was cut down. I immediately called all to join in prayer, in which I blessed the Father of mercies for giving me a son, continuing it to me so long, and taking it from me so soon. All joined in desiring that I could decline preaching ‘till the child was buried; but I remembered a saying of good Mr. [Matthew Henry], ‘that weeping must not hinder sowing,’ and therefore preached twice the next day, and also the day

¹ Courtney Anderson, *To the Golden Shore : The Life of Adoniram Judson* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1961), 194.

following, on the evening of which, just as I was closing my sermon, the bell struck out for the funeral. At first, I must acknowledge, it gave nature a little shake, but looking up I recovered strength, and then concluded with saying, that this text on which I had been preaching, namely ‘all things worked together for good to them that love God,’ made me as willing to go out to my son’s funeral, as to hear of his birth.”²

John G. Paton, reflecting on the death of his wife and infant son:

“Stunned by that dreadful loss, in entering upon this field of labour to which the Lord had Himself so evidently led me, my reason seemed for a time almost to give way. Ague and fever, too, laid a depressing and weakening hand upon me, continuously recurring, and reaching oftentimes the very height of its worst burning stages. But I was never altogether forsaken. The ever-merciful Lord sustained me, to lay the precious dust of my beloved Ones in the same quiet grave . . . But for Jesus, and the fellowship He vouchsafed me there, I must have gone mad and died beside that lonely grave!”³

Charles Spurgeon, writing to his son and daughter-in-law upon the loss of their son (and his grandson):

“My dear Children,

The Lord Himself comfort you. I want comforting myself. To think of that dear little creature being taken away! It must be right! It must be good! Our Father is never mistaken nor unkind. . . . I feel sure you will both find a secret strength poured into your souls, and in this also faith shall have the victory.

I shall never forget the day. . . . To you it must be a sharp cut; but our Lord has an almighty salve.

Your Loving Father,
C.H. Spurgeon”⁴

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² Michael A.G. Haykin, *The Revived Puritan: The Spirituality of George Whitefield* (Dundas, Ontario: Joshua Press, 2000), 167-169.

³ John G. Paton, *John G. Paton: Missionary to the New Hebrides* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2007 [Reprinted]), 79-80.

⁴ James W. Bruce III, *From Grief to Glory: Spiritual Journeys of Mourning Parents* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2002), 45-46.