

Psalm 139 The Preciousness of Human Life

Introduction

As Christians we are sometimes guilty of trying to misunderstand the Bible. We do not have a problem grasping what the plain text is saying but instead of accepting the most obvious meaning as the author intended we try and find a way round accepting what it really means. For example: Exodus 20:13 states: *You shall not murder*. This Friday 27 October was the fiftieth anniversary of passing of the 1967 Abortion Act. As a result approximately 8.8 million children lost their lives in the UK in the last fifty years, up from 6.7 million ten years ago. At the time in 1967, David Steel, sponsor of the bill through the House of Commons, had the support of many mainstream church leaders, as well as the medical organisations. The bill was sold as one to save women's lives because a small number of women died each year as a result of backstreet abortions. The proponents of the bill were adamant that they did not envisage or support any notion of 'abortion on demand' and as a result the silence from Evangelical Christians was deafening –only some years later as the numbers of abortions rose did many Christians find their voice –most notably people like Anglican John Stott, minister of All Souls Langham Place, London, who recognised that the failure of Christians to address a whole range of social and moral issues in society was an abdication of Jesus' call to live the Christian gospel as He intended. Jesus never drew a line at 'saving people's souls', his messages addressed the whole person. In 2007 George Verwer, founder of Operation Mobilisation, the Christian mission agency, made the following confession: "I am ashamed that I did not become more pro-active about pro-life earlier. I have learned that the Gospel is more than proclamation; it is also living out the Gospel in all of its aspects. Now I see the need to bring together Gospel proclamation with social concerns." George explains: "I feel God has really given me a message from the Good Samaritan. I believe it's fitting because there are so many people lying at the side of the road today; there are so many who are suffering and need Jesus - both for salvation and for those practical, life-sustaining needs we all have." The unborn are among those people who George Verwer envisions at the side of the road because he said: "Some estimates put the number of children who have been aborted at 500 million. The numbers are staggering, and in many ways I would rather ignore them. But I know that I cannot. "With so much abortion taking place, let us not consider it a lost cause and give up. No, many battles have been won, and every battle is a victory; every saved life a real person. "I believe that there are thousands alive today who otherwise would not have been without pro-life action.'

The pressure from the abortion industry and its powerful and vocal supporters in the media, such as *The Guardian* newspaper to move to abortion on demand for any reason is quite chilling [*The Guardian* 25 October 2017]. It is only four years ago that the Daily Telegraph investigative journalists revealed that there were a small number of doctors in the UK, who in violation of the law were engaging in sex-selective abortions for families who wished to have only baby boys not girls, but the Westminster Government's legal advisers suggested it was not in the public interest to prosecute them and uphold the law. [*Daily Telegraph* 10 January 2013] The idea that people may in future have the right to terminate a pregnancy simply on the basis of the gender of the child or not even have to declare it is chilling and a cause for which we need to stand firm. Ten years ago the former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams reminded us that in 1967 even the sponsors of the Abortion bill accepted 'a universal presumption of care for the foetus from the moment of conception was the norm'. He went on to express deep concern that 'there is a growing belief [in our society] that

abortion is essentially a matter of individual decision and not the kind of major moral decision' it had previously been acknowledged to be. [*Dundee Courier* 22 October 07]. A decade ago was the first time I gave a sermon on this topic but it appears that the pressures to water down our convictions about the preciousness of human life has never been greater than at the time of this anniversary

1. God's Clear Command

Exodus 20:13 states: *You shall not murder*; The Hebrew word **ratsach** is used forty-three times in the Old Testament and has the meaning of violent personal killings that have the term 'murder' associated with such actions. Only in Numbers 35:27 is the word used in the sense of judicially sanctioned execution of a person convicted of murder and this verse concludes: the executioner *may kill the accused without being guilty of murder*. The Bible allows the State (Romans 13) to *bear the sword* (13:4), but only to *bring punishment on the wrongdoer* never permitting the taking of the lives of those who are innocent. As individuals we are accountable to God and the taking of innocent human life is not an option granted to us –God alone reserves that position for Himself.

One of the very worst sins of the Amorite peoples of the land of Canaan for which they were removed from the land was their killing of young children in religious rituals. We are familiar with the story in Genesis 22 of Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah in which God tested Abraham to see if he would trust the Lord 100% even in the most difficult circumstances; In the story the man of God was asked if he was willing to offer his only son as a sacrifice to God. It was a test of faith like the earlier call to leave his extended family in Haran (Genesis 12:1) and move to the land of Canaan. However, we know that God, unlike the gods of the Amorite peoples, did not want the human sacrifice. It was obedience to His revealed will that He desired. The taking of innocent life was totally unacceptable to God. Child sacrifice is recorded in the Old Testament. Jephthah, the warlord in Judges 11 who had a very basic belief in God made a rash promise in a very difficult situation to offer as a sacrifice the first creature to greet him on his return home should he be victorious in battle. There is no doubt he expected a pet animal not his precious child, a daughter, to greet him. The saddest part of the story is the fact that his desire never to break a promise made (commendable under all reasonable circumstances) trumped the preciousness of life and led to the death of his beloved daughter, a sacrifice the Lord did not require or desire.

Leviticus 18:21 states: *Do not permit any of your children to be offered as a sacrifice to Molech, for you must not bring shame on the name of your God. I am the Lord.* Leviticus 20:1-5 is explicit about the responsibility both of an individual and the wider community to protect the lives of vulnerable children. ¹ *The Lord said to Moses,* ² *Say to the Israelites: 'Any Israelite or any alien living in Israel who gives any of his children to Molech must be put to death. The people of the community are to stone him.'* ³ *I will set my face against that man and I will cut him off from his people; for by giving his children to Molech, he has defiled my sanctuary and profaned my holy name.* ⁴ *If the people of the community close their eyes when that man gives one of his children to Molech and they fail to put him to death,* ⁵ *I will set my face against that man and his family and will cut off from their people both him and all who follow him in prostituting themselves to Molech.* Verses seven to eight make the point in terms of theological principles: ⁷ *Consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am the Lord your God.* ⁸ *Keep my decrees and follow them. I am the Lord, who makes you holy.* Deuteronomy 18:10 makes this point in terms of a general principle: *Let no-one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire...* The

prophet Micah also addressed this issue in his famous sermon in chapter 6 of his book. *With what shall I come before the Lord and bow down before the exalted God?...shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?* [the answer] *He has shown you O man what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God* (Micah 6:6-8] Pro-Abortion advocates might argue that these passages are primarily concerned with a religious ritual, and apply to children who had been born some time prior to these sacrifices and therefore has nothing to do with clinical decisions in the twenty-first century concerning whether to continue or terminate a pregnancy. A fair point, however but they signal very clearly that God has very strong views about the preciousness of the lives of children and the major reason given in the ancient Near East for taking the lives of vulnerable children was abolished.

2. Some Historical Considerations

Abortion as a form of birth control was used in Ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome. Greek philosophers debated the question concerning when human life begins. Pythagoreans argued for life beginning at conception, by contrast the Stoics believed it began at birth. So this debate is far from new. In fact it was only as a result of an edict from Emperor Constantine in 318AD that the practice of killing newborn children was banned with fathers held responsible if an infant died. The prohibition on exposing unwanted infants – dumping on the refuse sites and letting them die for lack of sustenance was outlawed in the Roman Empire but it persisted for several further centuries. Interestingly in Thirteenth Century English law a woman due for execution had her capital sentence commuted to a lesser term if she was pregnant, which could only be on the grounds of the life of the human being in her womb; although abortion was not banned in the UK until the 1861 ‘Offences Against the Person Act’ “made it illegal in the UK to supply or use ‘any poison or other noxious thing’ or to use’ any instrument or other means’ to cause a woman to miscarry’ (*Care Today Newsletter*, Autumn /Winter 2007). This law was in force until the introduction of the 1967 Abortion Act.

3. The Uniqueness of Human Life: Points for Reflection

(a)**God is the Giver and Lord of Life** Nehemiah 9:6 *You alone are the Lord. You made the skies and the heavens and the stars. You made the earth and the seas and everything in them. You preserve them all, and the angels of heaven worship you.* To play God with human life is to usurp His rightful place. This also points to a need for carefully defined ethical guidelines in certain fields of scientific research such as cloning and other work that has environmental implications. Focussing on human beings Genesis 1:26-27 points out our unique status in creation: *Let us make human beings in our image, to be like ourselves...So God created human beings in His own image; In the image of God He created them; male and female He created them* (NLV). We have responsibility for the rest of creation as stewards (Gen.1:28-30), but He has placed limits on our controls over human life. Peter Singer, a militant atheist and Professor of Bio-Ethics at Princeton University, advocates the rights of parents to ask a doctor to kill a baby if it has disabilities such as haemophilia; parents and other children would be happier according to Singer with only healthy children being retained, (Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 2nd ed. pp.185-6). What a total contrast to a Christian worldview where all people as persons are equally valued by God.

(b) Biblical Terminology Describes the Unborn in personal not impersonal terms

In Genesis 25:22 with reference to Rebekah pregnant with Esau and Jacob: *the two children struggled with each other in her womb*. Word here the normal Hebrew word for children used of offspring both inside and outside the womb. In Luke 1 when Mary went to Elizabeth to share news of what God had planned for them. Luke records: *At the sound of Mary's greeting, Elizabeth's child leapt within her...* (Luke 1:41) Elizabeth in her own words said: *When I heard your greeting the baby in my womb jumped for joy* (1:44). The same Greek word **brephos** used in Luke 2:12 of Jesus to the shepherds in Bethlehem: *You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger*. The same word used in Luke 18:15 *Some parents brought their little children to Jesus so He could touch and bless them*. The disciples irritated by the attention given to children wanted to stop them coming. Jesus in Luke 18:16 declared: *Let the children come to me. Don't stop them! For the Kingdom of God belongs to those who are like children*. Again the same word is used throughout for babies developing in the womb and after birth. There is no reference to foetal tissue becoming human. At conception a new life is created with its 46 chromosomes, as a distinct human being not identical with mother or father, but a unique person who simply needs nourishment from their mother and time to grow into an independent human being.

(c) The Principle of Impartiality (Deuteronomy 1:16-17) *Be perfectly fair in your decisions and impartial in your judgements*. The weak and vulnerable have equal claim on justice and life whether very young or very old. In Psalm 82:4 God declares: *Rescue the poor and helpless; deliver them from the grasp of evil people*. No category of persons in Britain today is more vulnerable than babies in the womb. Abortion violates the golden rule in Matthew 7:12 *Do unto others whatever you would like them to do to you*.

(d) God directs life in the womb (Psalm 139:13-16) *13 For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. 14 I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. 15 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, 16 your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. 17 How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! 18 Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand. When I awake, I am still with you*. This is an extraordinary Psalm describing human life 3000 years ago. The idea of God visualising every day of our lives from conception and rejoicing at the start of life of another person created in His image is amazing. With ultra-sound scans of increasing clarity human beings too can share something of His joy. Jeremiah (Jer.1:5) made an extraordinary statement: *The Lord gave me this message: I knew you before I formed you in your mother's womb. Before you were born I set you apart and appointed you as my prophet to the nations*. Paul in Galatians 1:15 also declares: *But even before I was born, God chose me and called me by His marvellous grace*. Can it be any clearer than that that the baby in a mother's womb is a human person with equal status before God with ourselves?

(e) The Biblical Penalty of 'life for life' when unborn children are killed (Exodus 21:22-25) *22 If men who are fighting hit a pregnant woman and she gives birth prematurely but there is no serious injury, the offender must be fined whatever the woman's husband demands and the court allows. 23 But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, 24 eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, 25 burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise*. The verb translated *give birth prematurely* refers to a live birth

in eleven separate O.T. passages, but does not refer to miscarriages, as another Hebrew word is used in such contexts. These sanctions indicate that the Old Testament places a very high value on pre-natal life.

(f) **Failing to defend the rights of one group of people makes us vulnerable to silence when the 'next group' is attacked** Between 1915 and 1917 over 1.5 million Armenians were slaughtered by the Turkish army for being Christian, the detailed descriptions are horrific. The world did nothing –Hitler used this fact to persuade key German leaders that nothing would happen if Germany also carried out a genocide –in this case of Jews. Proponents of abortion on demand do not only want that established by law, but also euthanasia legalised and many also incline toward or openly support the elimination of other vulnerable people.

4. The Implications of a Christian View of the Preciousness of Life

(a) **Christian Counselling and Care required** We have an obligation to speak out regarding the preciousness of life. However campaigns directed at politicians can only be a start. We recognise that there are some very difficult situations such as pregnancies conceived as a result of rape or where the child conceived has serious health issues though this is not an issue in over 90% of abortions. Counselling centres for women and couples considering abortion are essential. It is for this fact that throughout the UK this kind of service has been growing as Christians put their faith into action in this practical way.

(b) **Support for women and babies we encouraged them to keep** A large proportion of abortions are carried out on unmarried young women who if we encourage them to keep their babies will need friendship and support in a variety of ways from Christian friends as such pregnancies were almost certainly not planned. To keep a child with additional needs could have serious financial implications to the parents, even apart from the emotional impact on the family. Are we willing as a church to provide long-term care to assist should this be a possible outcome?

(c) **Speaking out for the unborn will be costly but the conscience of our nation is on the line** If we say and do nothing God will hold it against us. Isaiah 1:15 *When you lift up your hands in prayer, I will not look. Though you offer many prayers, I will not listen, for your hands are covered with the blood of innocent victims.* We cannot say we did not know. We particularly need to pray for doctors and nurses and others in the medical profession who face these issues week by week for wisdom and grace. I thank God for the growing number of medical professionals, not just people of faith, who are raising powerful questions about this tragedy in our land. Pray also for Care, S.P.U.C. and The Life League who have dedicated people committed to working on these issues as a specific ministry.

(d) **Forgiveness when we sin** *If we confess our sin He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness* (I John 1:9) Having an abortion is not an unforgiveable sin. Like any other sin if we confess it to the Lord and repent of our sin He will forgive us and it will be erased from His memory for ever. Too many people for life live with guilt and deep regrets for a decision taken in their youth when pressured by other people 'to do the right thing'. Yet so often the scars are so deep that Christian people in this position have so often gone for help to a pastor or leader of another church or agency to avoid people in their own church knowing about it. All of us have sinned and in the sight of God this calls for humility to pray with one another when we fall with the intention of getting us back on our feet walking with

the Lord. Paul in Galatians 6:1 wrote: *Dear brothers and sisters if another believer is overcome by some sin you who are godly should gently and humbly help that person back onto the right path.* We proclaim a gospel of God's grace to the undeserving—that is all of us – and all sins are equally unacceptable to a holy God. Therefore, we must never be in the condemnation business, but always recognise that 'but for the grace of God' you or I might have been in circumstances where we might have committed other violations of God's law. May the Lord help us to stand firm on this issue but equally be a people with a heart of compassion for people who need our help, for Jesus' sake Amen.