

Theological Significance *of* Children

Dan Brewster

THE CHILDREN & FAMILIES IN THE BIBLE SERIES

Book 6



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Scriptures quoted, unless otherwise noted, are from the New International Version

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THE IDEA FOR these studies came from a reading of the excellent book *Precious in His Sight* by Roy B. Zuck (Baker Books, Grand Rapids, Mi., 1996). Much of the material in the early versions then was based on gleanings from *Precious in His Sight*, and I am grateful to Dr. Zuck for permission and encouragement to explore in his book for those insights and principles. The book called *Children and Childhood in the Bible Revised Edition* was a result of that exploration.

This series of booklets uses much of the material in *Children and Childhood in the Bible*, but in this shorter “booklet” format. The material in each one can be covered in a day or so of group or individual study. I am grateful to Dr. Rosalind Tan, the Director of the Holistic Child Development Institute (HCDI) in Penang for the idea and the inspiration to rework the material in this smaller, booklet format. The booklets are in response to her passion to create materials very suitable for “grassroots” pastors, “lay” leaders, children’s workers and care givers. Thanks Rosalind!

Dan Brewster

I am very grateful once again for the expert assistance to my friend Ms. Lim Siew Ling. She contributed substantially to the creation of this Series. Her comprehensive familiarity with Scripture and wealth of pastoral and ministry experience gives her a marvelous ability to both explore and interpret Scripture and also to craft appropriate and provocative reflection questions. Thank you very much, Siew Ling!

And once again, I have been helped by my friend Mr. Kok Chik Bu in the overall design, look and feel of the books in this series. As has been the case with his work on other Holistic Child Development (HCD) resources, his creative touch has fashioned the attractive and readable style and format of the book. Thanks Chik Bu!

Finally, and not least, I am grateful to Compassion International, the organization in which I have served for nearly 30 years now, for the opportunity to spend time exploring the Word of God as part of my work to develop resources like these.

INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

THE PURPOSE OF this booklet and the others which follow is to help learners dig deep into the Word to see what it says about children and childhood. But more importantly, they are to create understanding of the worth and significance of children, and their role in pointing to and illustrating Christ's "upside down" Kingdom..

Some people have said that the Bible has little to say about children and childhood. But in fact the Scriptures are *full* of references to children. These booklets include hundreds of verses relating to the child. Moreover, these studies show that children play a significant role in the unfolding of the message of the Bible – that God loves and protects them; that they are extremely perceptive in understanding the things of God; and that God often deploys them as His messengers and models – often it seems when adults may have been too corrupt and deaf to His calling.

The Booklets in this Series are:

Book One: The Worth of a Child

Book Two: Family Life in Bible Times

Book Three: Nurture and Training of Children

Book Four: Parental Modeling and Generational Consequences

Book Five: Child Protection

Book Six: Theological Significance of Children

Note: A bibliography for the Series can be found at the end of Book Six.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOKLET

EACH OF THESE booklets contains four studies on a specific theme with a variety of Bible verses or reflections about children. The studies are structured as follows:

Topic Overview: A brief introduction to the topic which presents real life case studies or scenarios as a backdrop to the Scriptures and reflections of the study.

What Does the Bible Say? Here you will be asked to go to specific Bible passages to explore what the Bible says about children and understand more of God's heart for them.

Key Insights or Principles: For those Bible passages, you may find new insights or key learning related to the theme. It may be that the number and breadth of Scriptures on a topic surprises or impresses you. Or you may be convicted anew with the biblical perspective on some topics which contrast sharply with the perspectives we see today and hear about in the news. Write down the main biblical principle, as well as your personal observations and gleaned knowledge about the Scriptures on the topic.

Reflection Questions: This section asks you to apply the key biblical principles to your **personal life**, the **culture** in which you live, and the **context** of your society and circumstances in your own country. They may require more inquiry, research and personal reflection. There are no right or wrong answers to the reflection questions, but they will provide the basis for interesting and lively discussions about how children are viewed and treated in your own personal life, context, and culture/country. Ideally these questions should be discussed in groups. The discussions will draw you deeper into the biblical material, and point to the contemporary significance of the topic.

Where I have quoted Scriptures, I have used the New International Version. However, as you are doing your studies, you may profit from using a variety of versions if available. Also, while often single verses are given; good Biblical scholarship requires you to read the Scriptures around the verses, to have a fuller understanding of the historical settings, and contexts of the Scriptures.

Note: There are frequent references especially to Dr. Roy Zuck's outstanding book *Precious in His Sight*,¹ which inspired this Workbook. In some places we have sought to include more of Dr. Zuck's fine analysis and development of the many themes he addresses in his book. However, the references to his book can surely not do it justice. I highly recommend that learners using these booklets get a copy of *Precious in His Sight* which will add immeasurably to the depth and breadth of the topics explored here.

Whether you are a front-line childcare worker, a church or organization leader, I trust that these booklets will encourage, inspire, and provide you broad new insights about children and childhood in the Bible—and about your ministry and mission priorities.

¹ Roy B. Zuck, *Precious in His Sight-Children & Childhood in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1996).

THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF CHILDREN

MY FRIEND, KEITH White has been my mentor in seeking to understanding the significance of the child that Jesus placed in the midst of his disciples. He has also caused me to reflect much on the puzzling mystery of the Isaiah 7:14 passage: “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son and you will call him Immanuel.” This final lesson will be one to help us explore a bit of the theological significance of the “child in the midst,” and of the significance of the child as a sign of the coming Kingdom.

Keith White¹ has reminded us that,

“Jesus made specific theologically-significant statements with children in the midst of his disciples, or even in his arms. These statements, which are found in all three synoptic gospels, are not primarily concerned with urging adults to care for, teach (or venerate) children. They are about fundamentally important aspects of Christian theology: the Kingdom of God; greatness and humility; the change needed to enter the Kingdom of God; how welcoming a little child in the name of Jesus is a way of welcoming not only Jesus, but the One who sent him.

The lessons in this Book will be just a “taster” of the deep theological significance of the child in Scripture – a depth only now beginning to be sounded.

¹ Keith White, “Children as Signs of the Kingdom of God – a Challenge to us All,” in *Now and Next: A Compendium of Papers presented at the Now & Next Theological Conference on Children Nairobi, Kenya, March 9-12, 2011*. To be published in Penang, Malaysia in 2011.

STUDY 1: CHILDREN AS SIGNS OF THE KINGDOM

■ Introduction

THE BIBLE IS full of “signs.” In fact the word “sign” is used 81 times in the NIV, and “signs”, another 75 times. Signs are pointers to something else, usually the more important or “real” thing. They are not the “real thing” but pointers to the “real” thing.

Dr Keith White notes that throughout the OT while children are the first to suffer when sin, deceit, war, and famine affect a tribe or city, they are also “seen as a sign of God’s blessing.” He writes, for example, of the great insight in Isaiah 11:6 where the Messianic Kingdom is portrayed thus:¹

The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them.

A child leading! What a triumphant picture of a new world order! Where once children were often victimized in an “urban, war-torn, consumer market-dominated jungle of today,”² now they will enjoy the blessed freedom to roam and play even as wolves and lambs live peaceably with each other. They will lead – signifying a new and prominent role.

Isaiah also prophesied that the new earth will never again witness an infant “who lives but a few days” (Isaiah 65:20). God will remove all sorrows and sufferings. Indeed, children as “signs” point us not only to the Messianic Kingdom but also help us understand our mission on earth.

This study and the reflection questions may challenge us to think more “theologically” than other studies. It is deep, but immensely significant and rewarding.

For Further Exploration:

Keith J. White, “A Little Child Will Lead Them” at <http://www.childtheology.org>.

Jürgen Moltmann. *In The End – The Beginning* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), pp. 2-18.

John Collier & Associates, *Toddling to the Kingdom*, p. 15.

¹ Keith J. White, “A Little Child Will Lead Them,” at <http://www.childtheology.org>. I am indebted to Dr. Keith White for many of these insights about the child as a “sign.”

² Ibid.

■ What Does the Bible Say?

1. Reflect on how children or a child is related to biblical “signs” in the following passages. What are the circumstances provoking the sign in each instance? Discuss the significance.

Reference	Circumstances/Significance
Joshua 4:6	<i>Joshua asked each representative from the 12 tribes to take a stone from the middle of the Jordan to serve as a memorial and a sign for the future generation concerning God’s power and deliverance among the Israelites.</i>
Isaiah 7:14	
Luke 2:12	
Luke 2:33	
Revelation 12:1- 2	

2. Reflect on Isaiah 7:14 and discuss why God used a child to reveal His plan of salvation to mankind, rather than some more “predictable” indicator. What is the implication for things that are “small” or “insignificant” in God’s Kingdom?³

3. Reflect similarly again on Luke 2:12. Why did God use a tiny baby as a “sign” of His Incarnation? What does this reveal about the character of God?

³ Question adapted from Keith White, “A Little Child Will Lead Them.”

4. What is the significance of the word “child” being repeated again and again in the following Incarnation narratives of both Matthew and Luke?

Reference	Significance of the Child
Matthew 1:18, 23	
Matthew 2:8, 9, 11, 13, 14, 20, 21.	
Luke 1:31, 36, 42, 59, 62, 66, 76, 80	
Luke 2:5, 17, 27, 34, 38, 40	

5. Compare the narratives in Exodus 12 with that of Matthew 2:15, 16. What is the common theme? Discuss how children were the first martyrs for the foundation of the nation of Israel as well as the first martyrs for Christ.

■ *Key Insights or Principles:*

■ *Reflection Questions:*

1. One of the common themes in Scripture is that of strength in and through weakness. (Think of Jesus stooping to wash the feet of his disciples.) Jesus also “stooped” to receive little children. Discuss how this was not a sign of weakness, but one of strength and a “sign” of the Kingdom.

2. What is your understanding of the phrase “The kingdom of God [or heaven] belongs to such as these [the children] in Matthew 19:14; Mark 10:14 and Luke 18:16?” In what sense(s) does the Kingdom belong to children?

3. We know almost nothing about the child that Jesus placed in the midst of the disciples in the Matthew 18: 2-5; Mark 9:36-37; Luke 9:47-48. The only clue we have about his nature was his humility in the Matthew account. Why then is the child here a powerful starting point for theological discussions in Child Theology today?

4. In Isaiah 11, the Messianic Kingdom is vividly portrayed: "The wolf will live with the lamb...and a little child will lead them" (v.6). What is your interpretation of this verse? What does this verse suggest concerning the role of children in the future Messianic Kingdom?

5. Theologians commenting on the Kingdom of God often note that it is "already" and "not yet." The Kingdom is already and manifested in every act of kindness done in Jesus' name. At the same time, it is "not yet," for many people do not believe, and there remains much evil and "incompleteness" in the world.
- a. Reflect on how the child is also "already" and "not yet," and how they both shed light on each other.

- b. List the similarities between the child and the Kingdom.

6. Theologians also refer to Christ's Kingdom as the "Upside-Down Kingdom."⁴ Remembering Jesus' words that unless the disciples changed and became like a child, they would not enter the Kingdom, what does this say to you about an "upside-down Kingdom?"

7. Reflect and comment on this quote:

*"This unknown child is placed by Jesus and is a sign of hope, of promise, of a journey ahead, of potential growth, of discoveries and learning. Jesus offers a sign of life, and of encouragement. The disciples are to continue to dream, to long, to hope to experiment (and no doubt to fall over and have to start again) on their journey of faith."*⁵

⁴ Donald Kraybill, *The Upside-Down Kingdom* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1978).

⁵ Keith White, "Children as Signs of the Kingdom of God – a Challenge to us All," in *Now and Next: A Compendium of Papers presented at the Now & Next Theological Conference on Children Nairobi, Kenya, March 9-12, 2011*. To be published in Penang, Malaysia in 2011.

STUDY 2: GOD USES CHILDREN FOR SPECIAL TASKS

■ Introduction

THROUGHOUT SCRIPTURE, WE see God entrusting special truths to children or using them as His messengers or instruments. Dr. Wess Stafford, the President of Compassion International, likes to say that often when God had something REALLY important to do—something that He couldn't entrust to adults, He uses children instead. Sometimes, Stafford says, "God seemed to pause, rub his hands together, smile warmly, and say, "I need someone really powerful for this task. I know—I'll use a child."¹ "For example," he says, "think of how different things would be, for example, if Moses' sister, Miriam—just a child herself—had not rescued Moses from the Nile (Exodus 2)! Or think when God needed to get a stern message across to Eli, He confidently entrusted that message to a very young Samuel (I Samuel 3). How about the young captive servant girl, who knew how God was using Elisha, and urged Naaman, the powerful Syrian General, to go to him for healing (2 Kings 5:1-3)? All are remarkable examples of God valuing children enough to deploy them for special tasks in His dealing with His people.

What then, is the place of children in this turbulent 21st Century world? What is God's plan for children in the family, community, and the Church—His Kingdom?

For Further Exploration:

Dan Brewster, *Child Church and Mission, Revised Edition*, pp. 25-27.

Keith J. White, "A Little Child Will Lead Them—Rediscovering Children at the Heart of Mission" at <http://www.childtheology.org>.

¹ Wess Stafford, *Too Small to Ignore* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook Press, 2005). p.212.

■ What Does the Bible Say?

1. Read the following Scriptures below. Determine the **special tasks** God gave to the children in these verses. The names of some of the children mentioned are unknown, while others are specifically named. When possible, find or approximate the child's age. What important lessons do you see in His entrusting these matters to children?

Reference	Child	Approximate Age?	Special Tasks	Outcomes and Impact of Others
Genesis 22:6-12	Isaac		<i>Used as a vessel to test his father, Abraham's faith and love for God</i>	<i>A type of Christ that points people to God</i>
Genesis 37: 5-11; 36; 45:5-8	Joseph			
Exodus 2: 4-10	Miriam			
I Samuel 2:11; 3: 1-20				
I Kings 17:22				
2 Kings 5: 1-6				
2 Kings 11:21; 12:2				
2 Kings 22: 1-2; 23:3				
2 Chronicles 34:1-7				
Esther 2:17; 4:15-16; 7:3				
Jeremiah 1:4-10				

2. Read the following Scriptures and discuss **how** God used the children mentioned for special tasks. Note the **particular ability** or **quality** as demonstrated by the child to do the task.

Reference	How God Used Children	Particular Ability/Quality or Responsiveness Needed
2 Kings 5:1-3	<i>God used the slave girl to point her master to Prophet Elisha for healing of leprosy.</i>	<i>Childlike faith and prior knowledge or experience of God's healing power. She also knew of how God had used the Prophet Elisha to do miracles. The slave girl also had courage, compassion, took high risks and was also highly confident that the prophet Elisha could heal her master Naaman.</i>
Psalms 8:2		
Mark 9: 33-37		
John 6:5-13		

3. There is a “**mission**” component to God’s plan for children in that God sometimes uses children in special ways to further His Kingdom and to bring others to faith. See if you can find a “**missional**” component in the familiar passages below.

Reference	Children as Resources for Mission
I Kings 17: 19-24	<i>After Elijah resurrected the boy of the widow of Zarephath, she declared “Now I know that you are a man of God and the word of the Lord from your mouth is the truth.”</i>
2 Kings 5:4-6; 13-17	
John 6:8-14	

4. Consider the phrase “Now I know.....” used by Naaman in 2 Kings 5:15, and the widow of Zarephath in I Kings 17:24. What is the significance of these phrases in relation to children being used in the context of missions and evangelism?

5. When Jesus multiplied the 5 loaves and 2 fishes (given by the boy) to feed the multitude in John 6, how was this event a “missional” event? (Note vs. 14).

■ *Key Insights or Principles:*

■ *Reflection Questions:*

1. If a child (perhaps your own) tells you that God has spoken to him/her to do a certain thing to make a certain decision, in a manner such as the boy Samuel, what would be your reaction? Why? Discuss the appropriate steps to take in this situation in light of the above discussions.

2. Reflect upon the life of Joseph as it unfolded in the book of Genesis. What is the most common characteristic we know about Joseph from the many chapters devoted to his life? What same characteristics might we pray for in our own children today?

3. Based upon the Scriptures and examples above, can you identify other similar examples in the Bible? Does God use children in the same way today? Can you share a case study of a child from your experience?

4. Why do you think God uses children instead of adults in accomplishing certain tasks? In what ways are children unique from adults when accomplishing His tasks? Discuss and share examples from your family, community and church experiences.

5. Based upon this study, it is apparent that God will use young people for special tasks in the future. What do you think it might mean in Joel 2:28 and Acts 2:17 that “the young men will see visions.” How does this influence your attitude and perspective of children under your care?

STUDY 3: GOD USES CHILDREN TO INFLUENCE ADULTS

■ Introduction

DR. WESS STAFFORD writes: So far as we see in reading the Gospels, Jesus never admonished children to become more grown-up. He did, however, exhort grownups to become more like children (Mark 10:15). How often have you heard an exasperated parent (maybe yourself) growl at a child through clenched teeth, "Would you please grow up?!" Jesus said the opposite to His adult followers: "Would you please grow down?" That is what it will take for you to enter my Kingdom."¹

Apparently, just as we see today, there were some occasions when adults just didn't "get it." There is a remarkable pause in Jesus' teaching about some very grown up things in Matthew 11. In the midst of the teaching, Jesus seemed to stop with wonder and amazement and exclaimed, "Father, I praise you that you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, but you have revealed them to little children". What was it, do you think, that God had actually hidden from the wise, but revealed to the little children?

Why did God use children to teach Kingdom Truths? Who are His "target" audience, if not adults? What if we miss the whole idea of doing theology, missions and church simply because we adults have "misread or neglected God's revealed teaching about children and childhood?"²

The truth of the matter is that God uses children to teach adults. This theme should provoke us all to attain a fresh perspective of spirituality and ministry. As we sit at the Master's feet and open our hearts to these little ones, we will learn the "secret things" of the Kingdom.

For Further Exploration:

Roy B. Zuck, *Precious in His Sight*, pp. 201-216.

Keith J. White, "A Little Child Will Lead Them" at <http://www.childtheology.org>.

¹ Stafford, *Too Small to Ignore*, p.211.

² Ibid.

■ What does the Bible Say?

1. Read the following Scriptures from the synoptic Gospels. Identify and state how Jesus used the ministry to/with children to influence adults:

References	How Jesus Used Children to Influence Adults
Mark 5:40b-42	<i>Jesus used the resurrection experienced by the little girl to influence the adults to believe in the miraculous power of God.</i>
Mark 9: 23-24.	
Matthew 19: 13, Mark 10:13, Luke 18:15	

2. Read the story of David and Goliath found in I Samuel 17. In this passage, David's oldest brother (Eliab) "burned with anger" at David for his idea to confront the giant (I Samuel 17:28). Also, King Saul initially doubted David's ability because he was "only a boy" (vs. 33). Goliath, too, disdained David as "only a boy" (vs. 42). What spiritual truths did Eliab, Saul and the Philistines learn from young David's victory?

3. Read the following "child-related" words or phrases in the Pauline epistles. Study the contexts and identify the Kingdom truths or message that Paul wanted to teach the adults. The Primary Scriptures are mentioned below. For further investigation, you may also study the Supplemental Scriptures. Some are done for you:

Pauline References: Primary Scriptures	Child-related Words/Phrases	Kingdom Truths/Message
Romans 8: 15-16, 23	"we cry 'Abba Father'" "we are God's children" "our adoption as sons"	<i>Sonship; redemption; adoption</i>

I Corinthians 13:11	"when I was a child, I talked like a child; I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child."	
2 Corinthians 6:18	"I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters"	
Galatians 4:5-7	"God sent his Son" "no longer a slave, but a son"	<i>Redemption; sonship (heirs)</i>
Ephesians 4: 14	"no longer be infants, tossed back and forth...blown here and there	
Philippians 2:15	"children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation...shine like stars"	

Pauline References: Supplemental Scriptures	Child-Related Words/Phrases	Kingdom Truths/Message
Colossians 3:20	"Children obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord."	
I Thessalonians 5:5	"sons of light and sons of the day"	
I Timothy 2:15	"women will be saved through childbearing"	
2 Timothy 3:15	"from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures."	
Titus 1: 6	"a man whose children believe"	
Philemon 10	"my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains."	<i>Sonship: we are all equal at the foot of the cross</i>

■ *Key Insights or Principles:*

■ *Reflection Questions:*

1. Jesus told His disciples to “change and become like little children” or they “will never enter the Kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3). What are the “changes” that Jesus is expecting from the disciples? In this context, are these changes possible without the influence of the little children?

2. God chose Samuel to reveal His will for the Israelite nation (I Samuel 3; 1-21) during a time when “the word of the Lord was rare” and “there were not many visions”. (I Samuel 3:1) Why do you think God chose Samuel at that time, and how did God use young Samuel to influence the adults in his days?

3. In 1 Corinthians 13:11 Paul says “when I was a child, I talked like a child; I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child.” Discuss how it is possible to put away childish things, and still “become like little children ” as we are commanded to do in Matthew 18:3?

4. Share and discuss 1 or more examples from your own community of how adults (believers and non-believers) are dramatically **transformed** because of the influence of children.

5. In what ways in your ministry or leadership have you experienced the ability of children to **minister to, encourage, or stimulate faith** in adults? Give one or two examples. In what context did this happen?

STUDY 4: CHILDREN AND YOUTHS AS PARTNERS IN MISSION

■ Introduction

In the last quarter of the 20th century, children have gained increasing significance in the Kingdom of God. The Church is being made aware of God's heart for children. It is awakening to the significant role children played in the building up of the Kingdom of God throughout the 20th century and beyond.

In an earlier study I mentioned "The 4/14 Window: Child Ministries and Mission Strategy." It has become clear that the 4/14 Window is not just a catchy phrase, but a true 'window' of receptivity – an established fact. People do tend to come to Christ while they are young, while the 'cement' in their lives is still soft and impressionable.

But mission thinkers today are not just viewing children as objects of mission, but also as agents for mission. Indeed, many new initiatives and strategies are understanding children and youth as one of the most important resources for mission in the coming decades. This study will examine some of the bases for this new understanding of children and youth as "strong partners in Mission."

■ What Does the Bible Say?

1. In previous studies we have already noted many children in Scripture who made a difference, not just by their presence, but also through their actions. We might say they were "change agents." For each of the following young people from Scripture, write a statement about how they were a "change agent." Several are done for you.

	Children as Change Agents in the Bible
Naaman's wife's servant girl 2 Kings 5	<i>The brave servant girl of Naaman's wife is a clear "missional" story: she was in a cross-cultural situation; she knew a lot about the faith; God used her to influence a leader in a foreign land; that leader declared, "Now I know . . . !"</i>
Josiah 2 Kings chapters 22 & 23	<i>A boy king, hugely active as a change agent. Was the most effective of any OT king in confronting and challenging the worship of Baal.</i>

Joseph (Was only 17 when sold into slavery.) Genesis 41:41-57; 50:19-20	
Miriam Exodus 2:1-10	
Uzziah 2 Chronicles 26:3-5 Was 16 years old when he became king.	
Jeremiah Jeremiah 1:6	
Joash 2 Kings 11:21 – 12:19	
Azariah 2 Kings 15:2	
The boy with loaves and fishes John 6:8-9	
The brave servant girl Mark 14:66-70	<i>She twice had the courage to confront Peter about “being with Jesus” when Jesus was arrested.</i>
Timothy 2 Timothy 3:15	
Jesus himself Matthew 2:40-52	

2. What do you think it is that has been ‘hidden from the wise and learned and revealed to little children’ (Mt. 11:25) (Note this is possibly related to Jesus reference to the children playing silly games, causing Jesus to challenge the Bethsaida and Capernaum. At the very least, perhaps it has to do with a child’s willingness to repent, to not take things too seriously, to laugh and to celebrate.)

3. Review the story of the boy Samuel in 1 Samuel chapters 1-3.

- Note the instances where God spoke directly to Samuel, or ministered before the Lord. What does this say about God speaking directly to children and using them for his purposes?

- Continuing with the story of Samuel, Dr. Susan Greener notes that it is clear that “Samuel is not a passive receptacle of adult input, but an active participant in worship and service to God under the supervision of Eli the priest and likely in ways that are developmentally appropriate to Samuel’s age and abilities.”¹ List 4 important lessons which can be drawn from God’s interaction with Samuel in chapters 1-3.

¹ Greener, Susan. “Raising Samuel.” Paper presented to the 4/14 Missiology Conference on Children, Seoul, Korea, February, 2013.

- Greener also notes that while God spoke directly to Samuel, he still used Eli – a very imperfect role model – as a mentor. “[Samuel] needs a nurturing adult at this time of calling to help him discern God’s voice. Without Eli’s caring counsel, Samuel would likely remain only confused by a voice in the night that may be no more than a waking dream.”² Discuss what it may have meant for Eli to have this role.

4. Look at Joel 2:28-32, and Peter’s use of that text in Acts 2:17-21 below. What differences to you see? Do you think these are “missional” passages? Why or why not? What might these imply as we think of children and young people as agents for mission?

Joel 2: 28-32	Acts 2: 17-21
<p>And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. 29 Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days.</p> <p>30 I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and billows of smoke. 31 The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. 32 And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved</p>	<p>In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. 18 Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. 19 I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. 20 The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord. 21 And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved</p>

² Ibid.

Mark Oxbrow raised the following points in light of our biblical understanding of childhood in contemporary missions:³ Which of these points are in place or absent in your church structure with regards to children and why? Discuss.

- Whether churches regard children as full members of the Body of Christ and agents of God's mission

- Whether we expect children to engage in mission as 'little adults' or as children, exploring the particular gifting and calling that God has given to each child.

- Whether our churches allocate resources to children to facilitate their development, equipping, participation in, and initiating of, mission in their own contexts.

5. In Matthew 5:3-12, Jesus teaches that the Kingdom belongs to the poor. It is clear that children share with the poor the state of being socially marginalized, even excluded from God's favor. At best they occupy a peripheral position in human kingdoms. How does Jesus reverse this view?

³ Mark Oxbrow. "A Critical Review of Modern Missions Movement," Paper presented at the 4/14 Window Missiological Conference, Seoul, Korea, February, 2013

■ *Key Insights or Principles:*

■ *Reflection Questions:*

1. Do you believe that children can hear directly from God? Or must His voice be mediated through an adult? Explain.

2. Dr. Bambang Budijanto gives the following reasons for not engaging children in missions:⁴ What is your opinion on these statements?

A. Caring for Children vs. Scoreboard of Evangelistic Efforts. There has been a concern that focusing missions on and with children could be done for the sake of adding “numbers” to the evangelistic “scoreboard.” Do ministries utilize children and youth in evangelism to get higher numbers on the scoreboard?

⁴ Bambang Budijanto, in Brewster and Baxter-Brown, *Children and Youths as Partners in Mission*, Penang. p. 30, 31.

B. *Children are Easily Manipulated.* Do children accept Christ and play different roles in the ministry of the church with wrong motives (to gain acceptance or approval for example)? (The fact that the majority of Christians made their decision to follow Christ before the age of 18 would mean that many of us have been successfully manipulated.)

C. *Children are Immature.* Children and youth do not possess adequate biblical and theological understanding (cognitive). They are immature and unwise (mentally). There is a concern that engaging children in missions could be harmful for the children themselves, as well as hurting other people and ministries.

D. *Calling the Exception the Norm.* There are leaders who argue that God “normally” utilizes adults to fulfill His purpose. However Scripture indicates that He did utilize some children—Samuel, David, Esther, Naaman’s slave girl, Josiah, Jeremiah, and the young boy who offered the fish and bread to Jesus—but these are exceptions. To call these exceptions as the “norm” is heresy.

3. Susan Greener writes that the attitudes of both Hannah and Eli toward Samuel demonstrates that adults are to be godly stewards of the life of a child, recognizing that the sovereign God gives adults the opportunity to participate in children's lives as a gift and blessing, not as a right or merely for self-gratification.⁵

What stories/parables in the Bible could you use to support this principle?

4. Vinay Samuel writes:⁶ The child in my view does not need empowerment for mission but release. Whether it is mission as proclamation or mission as transformation, empowerment language continues to be significant in Christian mission. Do you agree or disagree? Why?

⁵ Greener, Susan in Brewster and Baxter-Brown, *Children and Youths as Partners in Mission*. Penang. Compassion. p. 174

⁶ Samuel, Vinay, in Brewster and Baxter-Brown, *Children and Youths as Partners in Mission*. Penang. Compassion. p. 276

BONUS STUDY 5: WILL INFANTS WHO DIE GO TO HEAVEN?

■ Introduction

FOR CENTURIES, THEOLOGIANS and laity have been intrigued by some practical issues on the spirituality of children. One of these issues concerns the spiritual destiny of (innocent?) children. Some of the questions presented by Zuck in his book, *Precious in His Sight* are the same kind of questions believers would have asked at one time or another, viz.,¹⁷

Are children born with a sin nature? If so, what is their eternal destiny if they die as infants?

Will children be condemned to an eternity in hell, or will they in some way make it to heaven?

If children are doomed to eternal punishment, is it attainable by some means other than faith in Christ?

If children are incapable of exercising personal faith in Christ, how can they be lost?

Most of us “instinctively” know and hope our answer to the question -- of course, infants will go to heaven! But most of us have never given much thought to what biblical foundations support this conviction. This rather “theological” study will give us some background to the issue and a more biblically informed response (or, it may raise more questions than answers for some!).

■ What Does the Bible Say?

1. Below are some Scriptures concerning the spiritual state of humankind for us to ponder. “What is your opinion on categorizing every human being into 3 classes, viz. the saved, the lost and the “innocent?”¹⁸ In what ways does your opinion **support** or **contradict** the following Scriptures concerning the universality of sin in humankind regardless of their age?

¹⁷ Zuck, *Precious in His Sight*, p.217.

¹⁸ Ibid., p.221.

References:	Spiritual State of Mankind
Genesis 8:21	<i>This verse states that "Every inclination" of a man's heart is "evil" from childhood and suggests that children are not "innocent" but falls under the category of "lost". Like adults, they too need to repent from their sins for salvation through Jesus Christ.</i>
Psalms 51:5; 58: 3	
Proverbs 22:15	
John 3:36	
Romans 3:9; 10	
Romans 5:12	
I Corinthians 15:22	

2. Read Ephesians 2:3. The Apostle Paul clearly states in his letter to the Ephesians that "we were by nature objects of wrath". What do these passages above say about the spiritual destiny of infants who die? Are infants exempted from the wrath of God when they are born since they are young and "innocent"?

3. Read the following parallel passages from the synoptic Gospels: Matthew 19:14; Mark 10:14 and Luke 18:15-17. Jesus made the statement that “The kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these”. We also learn that he was also referring to infants (Luke 18:15-17). Based upon your reading of these passages, answer the following:

- Are all children, regardless of age, automatic members of heaven? Why or why not?

- How do these children get into the Kingdom? Adults must get there through faith in Jesus Christ. How about the child?

- Who are the “little ones who believe” in Jesus in Matthew 18:6? Do you think this might refer to the faith of very young children?

4. In Matthew 18:14 when Jesus said that “Your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.” What did Jesus mean by that statement? Was Jesus teaching a doctrine of universalism (everyone will ultimately be saved)? Why or why not? How does Jesus’ statement implicate the spiritual destiny of infants when they die?

5. Read 2 Samuel 12:23. In this verse, what is your interpretation of David’s response concerning the death of his illegitimate son: “I will go to him, but he will not return to me.” Do you agree that this verse suggests that David’s son was “experiencing a conscious existence in God’s presence” after death and that they will meet again in heaven? (See Zuck, p. 219.) Why or why not?

6. Read Romans 5:18-20. Some believe that “all who die in infancy are saved”? If so, from a theological standpoint, what will “allow” them into heaven? What about the infants of unsaved parents? Discuss. Then see the points made by Roy Zuck in the Case Study below.

■ *Key Insights or Principles:*

■ *Reflection Questions:*

1. Are there babies in heaven? If so, do babies remain in their infancy age when they are resurrected? What is your opinion concerning infants who are in heaven but “still needs to grow to maturity”? (This position is against the idea that there are babies in heaven.) If so, what are the theological implications for resurrected bodies as a whole regardless of their age?

2. Some Christian traditions have viewed children as sinful. How could such a position lead to cruel and harsh treatment of children? Discuss with supporting Scripture references.

3. Read Revelation 7:9. Is it possible for heaven to be populated with adult multitudes only “from every nation, tribe, people and language”? If not, is it then possible that some tribes will then have to be represented in heaven by children who die in infancy of unbelieving parents? Discuss.

■ *Case Study:*

Roy Zuck presents 8 different perspectives on the question: *By What Means Will Deceased Infants Go to Heaven?*¹⁹ His premise is that infants who die will go to heaven. (See viewpoint#7). Which viewpoint do you prefer, if any, over all the other viewpoints, and why?

Viewpoint #1: Children who die as infants are taken to heaven because of the doctrine of universalism. The basic premise is that everyone will ultimately be saved and not one will be in hell. Therefore, infants will be in heaven even though they had no opportunity to believe. Consider the following Scriptures: Matt. 25:46; John 3:16, 18; 3:36; Rev. 20:15. Determine whether or not universalism is the basis of their salvation.

Viewpoint#2: Some believe infants will go to heaven because they are born innocent, without sin. Examine Scriptures: I Corinthians 15:22; Proverbs 22:15; Psalm 51:5; Romans 3:10. Discuss the analysis of this viewpoint based upon these Scriptures.

Viewpoint#3: Gregory of Nyssa of the fourth century first proposed the viewpoint that when infants die, they immediately mature and are given opportunity to place their faith in Christ for salvation. Zuck believes that this point of view has no biblical support and that if infants immediately before or after death are given the opportunity to be saved, it could suggest that some will go to heaven and others will not! Discuss.

Viewpoint#4: Zwingli, a Swiss Reformer proposed that infants who die will be in heaven because they are elected by God. This asserts that children of believing parents are among the elect, and will be saved, and that dying infants of non-Christian parents are also among the elect. This discussion is, of course much more rooted in the contexts of “the elect.” Discuss.

¹⁹ Zuck, pp.220-225.

Viewpoint#5: Infants can be saved by the “baptism of desire,” of the Christian parents who desired it for their children but were unable to obtain it before they died. Discuss the idea of an infant “desiring” baptism, and/or the ideas of Christian parents desiring baptism. What might happen if the parents of the infants do not desire salvation for their infants, due to the fact that they may know nothing of salvation and baptism?

Viewpoint#6: The theologian Warfield believes that infants who die will be regenerated because they haven’t rejected Christ. Three points to consider are: 1) Only those who consciously reject Christ are condemned to hell. 2) Infants cannot knowingly turn from Christ. 3) All dying infants will be in heaven even though they were born sinners and do not exercise faith.

Viewpoint#7: Zuck prefers the following view (found on p. 223 of his book): “all infants enjoy heavenly bliss not because they are born sinless or because they mature immediately after death ..., or because they are elect or had a desire for baptism or salvation.... Like everyone, infants need salvation. And salvation is only through Christ. Therefore, even though infants cannot exercise faith in him, he can remove their depravity.”

Viewpoint#8: Infants enter heaven by the fact that they have been baptized. This viewpoint has been supported by the Roman Catholic church and was first proposed by St. Augustine (A.D. 354-430).

CONCLUSION TO THE SERIES: WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

■ *The Value of Children in God's Bigger Story*

IF INDEED God has planned every child born on our planet as the familiar verses of Psalm 139: 13-16 assure us, then each child, both male and female—including you, the reader—has an important place in God's plan and bigger story. Once again, read these words, as is often taught, by inserting your own name into the passage:

"For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. 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."

This learning will affect not only how we view the children in our midst, but also it will inform how we view our role in the life of those children.

Think about the "children in our midst." Reflect upon the reality that if indeed each child is God's idea, then there is a plan and purpose for every one of us including those children in our lives. If that child doesn't receive the nurture and love of Christ through the people in his/her life context, then the original plans God desired for his beloved children possibly become derailed, due to the fact that we do live in a fallen world.

Because you have children in your life, either through familial or ministerial relationships, you are part of God's plan for that child in your midst! What an awesome calling, what a privilege. In order to grow in "childlike faith", those of you in leadership must continue to nurture and nourish the growth of your relationship with Jesus Christ, in order to not only live out your part in God's bigger story, but also to provide the responsible leadership and call in being part of the children's stories in your context. We learn that the only way that can happen effectively is to keep our life centered in Christ through the core activity of our own spiritual growth and relationship with Christ.

Who is the child in your midst? Ask God to show you your part in that child's story and ultimately His bigger story. You will then, as the Master Storyteller Jesus said, be the person Jesus described as a child of God, the greatest in the Kingdom: "Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." (Matthew 10:39). You will find your life, through service to the children in your midst.

As you reflect upon how the Scriptures have opened up to teach you more about the value of every child in God's bigger story of redemption, it is the hope that you, too, will continue to "grow in wisdom and stature and in favour with God and men" (Luke 2:52). That will happen as you abide in Christ, and shore up your own spiritual life as a growing child of God.

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THE CHILDREN & FAMILIES IN THE BIBLE SERIES

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- **What Does the Bible Say?** Here you will be asked to go to specific Bible passages to explore what the Bible says about children and understand more of God’s heart for them.
- **Key Insights or Principles:** For those Bible passages, you may find new insights or key learning related to the theme.
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