

PLENARY I

The Uniqueness of Christian Response to Invisible Children

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A. The invisible children, those who are usually taken for granted, marginalized, subject to exploitations and abuses whether domestic, peer or societal, maybe a new terminology but the phenomenon itself is very real even during ancient times. Let me cite two problem scenarios from the Bible about children, one a simple disregard and the other a tragic violence against children.

The first is found in Mark 10 when people were bringing their children to Jesus so He that might touch them, the disciples rebuked them (v.13). Why would the disciples do such a thing? Zondervan NIV Bible Commentary says that the exact reason why the disciples prevented the children from coming to Jesus is not stated, though they might have commendable motives such as wanting to protect the privacy of Jesus and shielding him from needless interruptions, they manifested lack of spiritual sensitivity. Jesus was indignant over such gesture of regarding children as unimportant and bothersome (v. 14a).

The second is in Jeremiah 31:15 where we read, This is what the LORD says: *“A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because her children are no more.”* “Undoubtedly, she is lamenting the exile of her children in 722-721 B.C. Ramah was five miles north of Jerusalem, the very place where exiles were gathered before deportation to Babylon (cf. 40:1). Jeremiah himself was in a camp for exiles in Ramah. She who had so longed for children (cf. Ge 30:1) is cruelly bereaved of them” (Ibid). This prophecy was applied later with the incident during the infancy of Jesus (Mat 2:5-6).

B. The invisible children when cared for and protected by individuals and some sectors of society, of course, in the bigger picture by God Himself, can become great people and contributors to the building up of families, societies and even nations. We have three challenging biblical narratives that will illustrate this.

The first one is the story of Joseph, he was very visible in the eyes of Jacob his loving father, but was hated and later sold by his brothers. Later on, he was instrumental to saving Israel, Egypt and the world during the severe famine. The second is the story of Moses, he was loved by his parents and later by Pharaoh's daughter, but he was among those endangered by infanticide taking place during his time. And although he was raised up in a royal setting, he had to grow up in a pagan environment and with some form of distance from his parents and fellow-men (Ex 1-2). Thirdly, is the story of Jesus Himself, whose birth was surrounded by a scandal. This happened when his mother was found to be with child before she came to be with Joseph (Mat 1:18). Later, he had to be taken out to Egypt by his parents while the rest of the babies his age were being slaughtered by insecure King Herod (Mat 2:13-20). Though Jesus was the promised King of the Jews and the very Son of God, except for the incident in the temple, he remained obscure in Nazareth until that day he was revealed before Israel in his baptism and since then has become known as Savior of the world.

Let me share the uniqueness of Christian response to invisibility of children through three related topics, namely – 1. What the Bible generally say about children, 2. Some tragedies in the Bible involving children, and 3. What the Bible say about responding to invisible children.

I. THE BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF CHILDREN – Children, by virtue of their age, size, and peculiar conditions, are not easily noticeable in our society except when there are parties organized by their parents or products being advertised for them. Although they maybe neglected in the sights of many people, media and institutions, they are given special attention in the Bible where they are mentioned at least five hundred times. Let me share some basic teachings of the Bible about children that are fundamentally helpful in dealing with the issue of invisibility of children.

A. Children are precious to God and should be given importance and treated with dignity like adults. The coming of children is presented as God's prerogative in the Bible *Psalm 127:3 Behold, children are a gift of the LORD, the fruit of the womb is a reward. 4 Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, so are the children of one's youth. 5 How blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them; They will not be ashamed when they speak with their enemies in the gate.* (See also Gen 30:1-2; 33:5). They are a focus of God's concern (Num 14:31; Ps 36:7) and entrusted to us and the community of faith to care for (Gen 45:8-11). This regard for children should be extended even to illegitimate ones (See Gen 21:10-13).

Gen 21:10 When Sarah said to Abraham, "Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac." 11 The matter distressed Abraham greatly because it concerned his son. 12 But God said to him, "Do not be so distressed about the boy and your maidservant. Listen to whatever Sarah tells you, because it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned. 13 I will make the son of the maidservant into a nation also, because he is your offspring." cf. Gen 21:15-21

B. Children are part of God's kingdom and should be regarded as essential component of the community of faith. In the Old Testament, children were included when God's people gathered and came before His presence (Joel 2:15-16). *Deut 31:12 "Assemble the people, the men and the women and **children** and the alien who is in your town, so that they may hear and learn and fear the LORD your God, and be careful to observe all the words of this law. 13 "**Their children**, who have not known, will hear and learn to fear the LORD your God, as long as you live on the land which you are about to cross the Jordan to possess."*

We read examples of this in *2Chron 20:13, "All Judah was standing before the LORD, with their infants, their wives and **their children**,"* and *Ezra 10:1 Now while Ezra was praying and making confession, weeping and prostrating himself before the house of God, a very large assembly, men, women **and children**, gathered to him from Israel.*

When the disciples were hindering children to be brought to Jesus, Jesus replied, *"Let the **children** alone, and do not hinder them from coming to Me; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these."* Cf. Lk 18:16; Mat 21:15-16.

C. Children, despite their limitations, count and have a role to play in the family and can be responsible part of the church in fulfilling God's mission. Despite their seeming ignorance and limitations, we can read amazing statements such as in *Psalm 8:2 "From **the mouth of infants and nursing babes** You have established strength,"* and *Mat 11:25 At that time Jesus said, "I praise You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have revealed them to **infants**.*

The Scriptures has mandates for them, we read in *Col 3:20 "Children, be obedient to your parents in all things, for this is well-pleasing to the Lord." Cf. Eph 6:1. 1Tim 5:4 "but if any widow has children or grandchildren, they must first learn to practice piety in regard to their own family and to make some return to their parents; for this is acceptable in the sight of God." Cf. 1John 2:13; 4:4.* No wonder, their parents and the church is given mandate to raise them up towards becoming responsible and God-fearing members of the community of faith (Eph 6:4; Col 3:20; Tit 2:4)

D. Children are important considerations when choosing leaders. Community leaders who cannot take care and manage their children should not be leaders of the community. The right raising up of children is a part of requirements for would be overseers or bishops and deacons. We read from 1Tim 3:4 *“He must be one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity,”* and 1Tim 3:12 *“Deacons must be husbands of only one wife, and good managers of their children and their own households.”* cf. Tit 1:6.

II. SOME TRAGEDIES INVOLVING CHILDREN IN THE BIBLE

A. Children may come to the world through unfortunate circumstances. It is a tragic fact in the Bible and in many cases today that children are affected by the fallen and broken world. Some unfortunate examples of this were the birth of Ishmael in the context of the need of Abram and Sarah for a child (Gen 16), the birth of the children of Lot’s daughters from him, (Gen 19), the birth of Jacob’s children in the context of conflict between sisters and their maids (Gen 29-30), and the birth of the first child of David from Bathsheba (2Sam 12). But the most fundamental tragedy was what David wrote in *Psalm 51:5*, *“Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me.”*

B. Children are affected by the disobedience and wrong decisions of their parents and may become helpless casualties of community actions. Some of the examples are - the vow of Jephthah (Judg 11), the decision to immigrate by Elimelech and Naomi’s (Ruth 1), the command to destroy the Amalekites, which included children (1Sam 15). They were used as burnt offerings by pagans (2Ki 17:31; Ezek 16:21; 23:39), which by the way was condemned in Scriptures (Lev 18:21; 20:3). They became victims of social injustices such as when they were used as payments for debts or obligations (2Ki 14:1; Neh 5:5; Mat 18:25), when they begged for their and families subsistence (Ps 109:10) and used even as food during severe famine (Lam 4:10). They were also victims of political violence and wars (1 Sam 22:19; 1Ki 20:5; 2Ki 8:12; 15:16; Esther 3:13; Jer 18:21; Nah 3:10; cf. Deut 2:34; Isaiah 57:5; Jer 31:15; Mat 2:16-18.

C. They are forced to depend, live and even work in unfavorable settings, worse depend for living and governance from their captors and abusers. In the Bible, we can point the cases of Joseph who spent the rest of his adolescent stage as slave to Potiphar, and the Israelites during their four centuries of being slaves in Egypt and seventy years of exiles in Babylon.

There are many cases of this today reported in media and portrayed in movies where children are forced to live with the very parents or guardians who are unfit to take care of them, because they are neglectful, controlling, substance dependent, quarrelsome and abusive or their combinations. There are those who are supposed to be still cared for by their parents, learning and even playing, but are getting forced to work. They are supposed to eat and sleep in a caring and protected environment, but are plunged into shameful and even dangerous settings.

III. THE CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO INVISIBLE CHILDREN

A. We need to orient and instruct the parents or guardians to regard their children as special and if necessary guide and equip them how to raise children up so that their potential can be discovered, developed and reached to the fullest. The psalmist and wise man wrote - *Psalm 34:11* *Come, you children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the LORD;* *Prov 22:6* *Train up a child in the way he should go, even when he is old he will not depart from it;* *Prov 22:15* *Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child; the rod of discipline will remove it far from him.* See the example of Hannah in 1Sam 1-2.

B. We should have good models of parenthood, not just the mothers but especially the fathers, how to raise up children with dignity, purpose and inspiration. We need to encourage and increase their capacity to raise up children. The Scriptures gave some instructions how to do this, the most common of them are –

Deut 6:4 “ Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! 5 “ You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. 6 “ These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. 7 You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. 8 “ You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. 9 “ You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Eph 6:4 Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. Cf. Col 3:21; See also Psalm 128. See Paul’s model in raising Timothy (1Cor 4:17; 1Tim 1:2), Titus (1:4) and Onesimus (Philemon 10). See also 1Thes 2:7; Tit 2:4.

C. We, parents, the church and the society, should include them in our considerations when making decisions. *2Chron 31:18 The genealogical enrollment included all their little children, their wives, their sons and their daughters, for the whole assembly, for they consecrated themselves faithfully in holiness.*

Gen 33:13 But he said to him, “My lord knows that the children are frail and that the flocks and herds which are nursing are a care to me. And if they are driven hard one day, all the flocks will die.

Deut 4:40 “ So you shall keep His statutes and His commandments which I am giving you today, that it may go well with you and with your children after you, and that you may live long on the land which the LORD your God is giving you for all time.”

D. We should encourage individuals to assist in helping invisible children and provide structures by which they may seek refuge, get inspiration and practical instructions on how to discover and pursue their potentials and assist them get restored to their families and communities (Mal 4:6).

Remember the example of Pharaoh’s daughter who raised up Moses, Mordecai who was a second parent to Esther, Joseph who was there for Jesus even if he was just a step-father, the wise men who brought gifts to Jesus and the synagogue setting where children are brought for learning.

E. We should develop ways and support legislative measures, both local and international, that will promote the care and interest of children, prevention of and penalizing abuse of children, and recognize efforts and institutions that inspire children to develop their full potential. Some examples of this are found in 1Kings 3, Lk 2:27-40 and 2Chron 25:4.

But let me highlight, the example of King Josiah. Yes, invisibility can also happen among those born from privileged class. Josiah was a son of King Ahaziah, but he had to be stolen by her auntie, Jehosheba, the sister of king Ahaziah, during the time the king’s sons were put to death by Athaliah, the mother of Ahaziah. Jehosheba hid Josiah and his nurse in her bedroom and later transferred in the house of the Lord, there he was protected by the captains of the Carites under the oversight of Jehoiada the priest for six years. This was the case until the seventh year when Josiah was crowned king in his eight year and Athaliah the queen was slain (2Ki 11:1-21)

When King Josiah ordered the repair of the temple in his eighteenth year of reign, the high priest found a book of the law. After reading it, the king was great shocked and held a national assembly to renew a covenant with God which was followed by purging of idolatry and celebration of the Passover (2Ki 22-23; 2Chron 34,35). He was regarded as Israel’s last God-fearing king and confirmed as such by Huldah the

prophetess (2Ki 22:18-20; 23:25). This was a result of the influence of his guardian priest, "Joash did what was right in the sight of the LORD all the days of Jehoiada the priest" (2Chron 24:2). Again, let me mention, when invisible children are protected and nurtured by responsible parent, guardian or institution, they can become great instruments of blessing.

Conclusion: I like to end this presentation with four biblical exhortations-

A. Invisible children when cared for, instructed and drawn to God can end up being honorable and recognized. In addition to examples given above, let me cite the popular example of Jabez. *1Chron 4:9 Jabez was more honorable than his brothers, and his mother named him Jabez saying, "Because I bore him with pain." 10 Now Jabez called on the God of Israel, saying, "Oh that You would bless me indeed and enlarge my border, and that Your hand might be with me, and that You would keep me from harm that it may not pain me!" And God granted him what he requested.*

B. Invisible children, together with other disadvantaged people, should be cared for and protected by the leaders of nations. We read from Psalm 72. *1 Endow the king with your justice, O God, the royal son with your righteousness. :2 He will judge your people in righteousness, your afflicted ones with justice. . . 4 He will defend the afflicted among the people and save the children of the needy; he will crush the oppressor. . . 12 For he will deliver the needy who cry out, the afflicted who have no one to help. 13 He will take pity on the weak and the needy and save the needy from death. 14 He will rescue them from oppression and violence, for precious is their blood in his sight.*

C. Despite the fallen condition of humanity, the eschatological vision of the Future involves redemption of the children - *Isaiah 11:6 And the wolf will dwell with the lamb, and the leopard will lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little boy will lead them. 7 Also the cow and the bear will graze, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. 8 The nursing child will play by the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child will put his hand on the viper's den. 9 They will not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. 10 Then in that day the nations will resort to the root of Jesse, who will stand as a signal for the peoples; and His resting place will be glorious*

*Isa 65:17 "Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. 8 But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. 19 I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people; the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more. 20 "Never again will there be in it **an infant** who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his years; he who dies at a hundred will be thought a mere youth; he who fails to reach a hundred will be considered accursed. 21 They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. 22 No longer will they build houses and others live in them, or plant and others eat. For as the days of a tree, so will be the days of my people; my chosen ones will long enjoy the works of their hands. 23 They will not toil in vain **or bear children doomed to misfortune**; for they will be a people blessed by the LORD, they and **their descendants** with them. 24 Before they call I will answer; while they are still speaking I will hear. 25 The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, but dust will be the serpent's food. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain," says the LORD.*

D. Invisible children can look up to the person of Jesus for hope. It's almost unimaginable, but it happened, the invisible God Himself made himself known to us through an initially invisible child (John 1:1-18). However, in the process, through the angels, shepherds, wise men and religious people like Simeon and Anna, and much later John the Baptizer, he was revealed as the hope not only of Israel but for mankind.

Seven hundred years before his coming, the prophet Isaiah spoke about his glorious coming as a child, *“Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel (Isa. 7:14). . . For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; And the government will rest on His shoulders; and His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace (Isa 9:6).*

He, in fact modeled for us, how we should respond to children. It was through him, that children, though oftentimes not included in counting, were mentioned together with women in gatherings (Mat 14:21; 15:38). When talking about greatness, he called a child and set him before his disciples as his illustration (Mat 18:2-5; Mark 9:34-37), and in fact, highlighted that the kingdom of God belongs to them and is for such as them (Mat 19:13-14; 21:15-16; Mark 10:13-15; Lk 18:16). He also commended them against the background of their critics, we read in Mat 21,

*“But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that He had done, and **the children** who were shouting in the temple, “Hosanna to the Son of David,” they became indignant and said to Him, “Do You hear what **these children** are saying?” And Jesus *said to them, “Yes; have you never read, ‘**OUT OF THE MOUTH OF INFANTS AND NURSING BABIES YOU HAVE PREPARED PRAISE FOR YOURSELF?**’” (vv.15-16).*

There is a great encouragement for all individuals and institutions involved in ministry to children which I found from all the four gospels. When parents or guardians were grieving because of serious problems of their children, Jesus was there for them and He raised up their children (Mat 9:23-26; Cf. Mark 5:35-41; Mk 7:24-37; Lk 7:11-16; John 4:46-54). Using the thought of the song God will Make a Way, “There is no problem too big or difficult involving children which Jesus will not be able to solve.”