

Biblical Reflection on Child Rights

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This biblical reflection examines child rights from a Christian perspective, using the Exodus story of God's people in Egypt. In the following passages, many years had passed since the prosperous time of Joseph, and God's people were now being severely oppressed by the Egyptians. As you read, consider how God responds to the suffering of His people and what implications it may have on our view of child rights.

Part I Scripture and Discussion

Exodus 1:8-14, 3:7-9

8 Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. ⁹He said to his people, 'Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. ¹⁰Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.' ¹¹Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labour. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. ¹²But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. ¹³The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, ¹⁴and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labour. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them...

7 Then the Lord said, 'I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, ⁸and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey...

Discussion questions:

1. What human abuses or injustices do you observe in this passage?
2. What kind of abuses or injustices do you observe in your own context or countries that specifically affect children?
3. What is the Lord's response to the suffering of His people? Why do you think He responds this way?

Part II Scripture and Discussion

Now, read these next few passages on how the Lord ensures the protection of the most vulnerable after the Israelites were delivered from the hands of the Egyptians.

Exodus 22:21-23

21 You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. ²²You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. ²³If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry;

Leviticus 19:9-10

9 When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. ¹⁰You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the Lord your God.

Deuteronomy 10: 17-19

¹⁷For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, ¹⁸who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them with food and clothing. ¹⁹You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

Discussion questions:

1. What relationship is there between God's nature and the responsibility of God's people in favour of the most vulnerable?
2. What policies does God prescribe to guarantee that the rights of the most vulnerable are upheld among His people the Israelites?
3. What implications do these passages have for children today—especially for the most vulnerable children?
4. How do you think God is responding to the suffering of the most vulnerable today?

Reflection

Although humanity has only progressively grown into an awareness of the rights of children, God has always bestowed an inherent dignity upon children throughout history. This is evident in creation (Gen. 1:27) in which humans are the only beings who are created in God's image. The value of humankind is affirmed by Jesus' birth as a child and His death and resurrection on the cross for the salvation of all people. From this perspective, the rights and dignity of children are not only human, but also divine. These rights are not something that are to be demanded, but are graciously given, enacted and protected by God. Therefore, upholding child rights is deeply spiritual. Violating them is not only a legal but also a divine offense.

In the Old Testament, the Lord upheld the dignity and rights of the most vulnerable in ancient Israelite society by setting forth guidelines for the treatment of orphans, widows, aliens and the poor. Today, we have similar guidelines and tools to protect the dignity of vulnerable children, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The CRC encompasses what the Bible already states about God's special concern for children and sets standards for child protection. As Christians, we have a fuller sense of the value that God lavishes on children, but we can use the CRC as a tool to reflect and enact our Biblical understanding of God's love to a secular world.

The passages above not only tell us how God responded when the rights and dignity of His people were exploited back in the Old Testament, but are an example of how God continues to work for the full realisation of child rights even today. The Lord still has great compassion on vulnerable children, continues to use His people today to rescue those under oppression, and provides us with tools (like the CRC) to ensure that the most vulnerable are not forgotten. As followers of Christ, we are invited and allowed to participate in God's action in the world concerning the rights of all children. We serve a God who is actively engaged in child rights and uses us as His instruments to intervene on behalf of the oppressed and destitute children around the world. As we strive to loose the bonds of injustice, to set the oppressed free, and to share our food and homes with the poor and hungry (Isaiah 58), we should consider child rights advocacy and programming as an expression of our partnership with a compassionate and gracious God.

Prayer for children

Let us remember the children in the world whose rights to dignity, justice, peace, and fullness of life are not yet a reality – and pray for them.

Ever compassionate Lord, be gracious to us and hear our prayer:

We pray today for the suffering children in our midst and those we do not see.

We know that your eyes see their tears,
that your heart knows their sorrow,
that your hands can reach them now.

We remember that Jesus was once a child,
that poverty stole his bread,
that tyrants sought his life,
that his mother tasted tears.

We ask you to send friends for the lonely,
food for the hungry,
medicine for the sick,
saviours for the enslaved,
rescue for the perishing.

Give us the wisdom to do our part,
share our possessions,
leave our comforts,
lend them our voice,
send them our food,
love them with more than prayers.

We call on you in the name of your child Jesus.
Amen.

(Adapted from a prayer by Tony Kummer, www.ministry-to-children.com)