



What the Bible Says about

**ABORTION,
EUTHANASIA, AND
END-OF-LIFE MEDICAL
DECISIONS**



Wayne Grudem

“If you want to understand what the Bible teaches and what Christians think about these vital matters of life and death, this book is for you!”

John F. Kilner, Professor Emeritus of Bioethics and Contemporary Culture, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“Wayne Grudem has faithfully offered a biblical-theological groundwork for making some of the most difficult decisions at the edges of life—its beginning and end. How does one who is committed to the sanctity of every human life approach questions about abortion, euthanasia, and other end-of-life issues? Digest this book to find out.”

C. Ben Mitchell, Graves Professor of Moral Philosophy, Union University

What the Bible Says about Abortion, Euthanasia, and End-of-Life Medical Issues

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Wayne Grudem

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INTRODUCTION

What does the Bible teach about the protection of an unborn child?

Is there scientific evidence that the unborn child is a distinct person?

What about abortion in the case of rape or to save the life of the mother?

Is it wrong to put to death a person in great pain who has no hope of recovery?

How can we know when to stop medical treatment near the end of someone's life?

Should the law allow doctors to perform euthanasia when a patient requests it?

This book examines the Bible's teachings on two subjects—abortion and euthanasia—that in many ways are subcategories of the same topic, the protection of human life, both at the beginning of life (in the mother's womb) and at the end of life (in a hospital bed).¹

1. Much of the material in this section has been adapted from Wayne Grudem, *Politics—According to the Bible: A Comprehensive Resource for Understanding*

In the Ten Commandments, we read this:

You shall not murder. (Ex. 20:13)

But this commandment is not confined to the Old Testament. It is repeated several times in the New Testament (see Rom. 1:29; 13:9; 1 Tim. 1:9; James 2:11; 4:2; 1 John 3:12, 15; Rev. 9:21; 16:6; 18:24; 21:8; 22:15; see also Jesus's teaching in Matt. 5:21–26; 15:19; 19:18). The New Testament authors frequently affirm the continuing moral validity of the commandment “You shall not murder.”

God is the Creator and sustainer of human life, and human beings are the pinnacle of his creation, for only human beings are said to be created “in the image of God” (Gen. 1:26–27). Therefore, God absolutely forbids human beings to murder one another.²

PART 1: ABORTION

Abortion is one of the most controversial topics in society today. Differing views about this topic are related to deeply felt personal convictions about privacy, human sexual behavior, pregnancy, parenthood, and human life itself.

In this section, I will attempt to give an accurate summary of biblical teachings related to abortion and also to

Modern Political Issues in Light of Scripture (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 157–78; and *Christian Ethics: An Introduction to Biblical Moral Reasoning* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 566–86, with permission of the publishers.

2. I have elsewhere discussed the fact that the Bible does not view capital punishment or killing an enemy in a just war or in self-defense as “murder,” but uses other words to refer to these actions. See Grudem, *Christian Ethics*, 505–6, and chaps. 18, 19, and 20.

represent fairly the arguments of people who disagree with my position. I will use the term *abortion* to mean any action that intentionally causes the death and removal from the womb of an unborn child.

A. BIBLICAL EVIDENCE FOR THE PERSONHOOD OF AN UNBORN CHILD

By far the most powerful argument against abortion is the consideration that the unborn child is a unique person. Several passages in the Bible indicate that an unborn child should be thought of and protected as a person from the moment of conception.

1. Luke 1:41–44. Before the birth of John the Baptist, when his mother, Elizabeth, was in about her sixth month of pregnancy, she was visited by her relative, Mary, who was to become the mother of Jesus. Luke reports:

And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry, . . . “Behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, *the baby in my womb leaped for joy.*” (Luke 1:41–44)

Under the influence of the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth called the unborn child in the sixth month of pregnancy a “baby” (Greek, *brepheos*, “baby, infant”). This is the same Greek word that is used for a child *after* it is born, as when Jesus

is called a “baby [*brephos*] lying in a manger” (Luke 2:16; see also Luke 18:15; 2 Tim. 3:15).

Elizabeth also said that the baby “leaped for joy,” which attributes personal human activity to him. He was able to hear Mary’s voice and somehow, even prior to birth, feel joyful about it. In 2004, researchers at the University of Florida found that unborn children can distinguish their mothers’ voices and distinguish music from noise.³ Another study, reported in *Psychology Today* in 1998, confirmed that babies hear and respond to their mothers’ voices while still in the womb, and the mothers’ voices have a calming effect on them.⁴ More recent research (2013) has shown that babies learn words and sounds in the womb, and retain memories of them after they are born.⁵

2. Psalm 51:5. In the Old Testament, King David sinned with Bathsheba and then was rebuked by Nathan the prophet. Afterward, David wrote Psalm 51, in which he pleads with God, “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love” (v. 1). Amidst confessing his sin, he writes:

3. University of Florida. “University of Florida Research Adds to Evidence That Unborn Children Hear ‘Melody’ of Speech,” *Science Daily*, Jan. 23, 2004, www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2004/01/040123001433.htm.

4. Janet L. Hopson, “Fetal Psychology,” *Psychology Today*, Sept. 1, 1998 (last reviewed June 9, 2016), <https://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/199809/fetal-psychology>.

5. Eino Partanen et al., “Learning-induced neural plasticity of speech processing before birth,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, Sept. 10, 2013, <http://www.pnas.org/content/110/37/15145.full>. Also see Beth Skwarecki, “Babies Learn to Recognize Words in the Womb,” *Science*, Aug. 26, 2013, <http://www.sciencemag.org/news/2013/08/babies-learn-recognize-words-womb>.

Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,
and *in sin did my mother conceive me*. (Ps. 51:5)

David thinks back to the time of his birth and says that he was “brought forth” from his mother’s womb as a sinner. In fact, his sinfulness extended back even prior to his birth, for David, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, says, “In sin did my mother conceive me.”

Up to this point in the psalm, David is not talking about his mother’s sin in any of the preceding four verses, but is talking about the depth of *his own sinfulness* as a human being. Therefore, he must be talking about himself, not about his mother, in this verse as well. He is saying that from the moment of his conception *he* has had a sinful nature. This means that *he thinks of himself as having been a distinct human being, a distinct person, from the moment of his conception*. He was not merely part of his mother’s body, but was distinct in his personhood from the time when he was conceived.

3. Psalm 139:13. David also thinks of himself as having been a person while he was growing in his mother’s womb, for he says:

You formed my inward parts;
you knitted *me* together in my mother’s womb.
(Ps. 139:13)

Here also he speaks of himself as a distinct person (“me”) when he was in his mother’s womb. The Hebrew word

translated as “inward parts” is *kilyah*, literally “kidneys,” but in contexts such as this it refers to the innermost parts of a person, including his deepest inward thoughts and emotions (see its uses in Pss. 16:7; 26:2; 73:21; Prov. 23:16; Jer. 17:10).

4. Genesis 25:22–23. In an earlier Old Testament example, Rebekah, the wife of Isaac, was pregnant with the twins who were to be named Jacob and Esau. We read:

The children [Hebrew, *banim*, plural of *ben*, “son”] struggled together within her, and she said, “If it is thus, why is this happening to me?” So she went to inquire of the LORD. And the LORD said to her,

“Two nations are in your womb,
and two peoples from within you shall be
divided;
the one shall be stronger than the other,
the older shall serve the younger.”
(Gen. 25:22–23)

Once again, the unborn babies are viewed as “children” within their mother’s womb. (The Hebrew word *ben* is the ordinary word used more than forty-nine hundred times in the Old Testament for “son” or, in plural, “sons” or “children.”) These twins are viewed as already struggling together. Before the point of birth they are thought of as distinct persons, and their future is predicted.

5. Exodus 21:22–25. For the question of abortion, perhaps the most significant passage of all is found in the specific

laws God gave Moses for the people of Israel during the time of the Mosaic covenant. One particular law spoke of the penalties to be imposed if the life or health of a pregnant woman *or her unborn child* was endangered or harmed:

When men strive together and hit a pregnant woman, so that her children come out, *but there is no harm*, the one who hit her shall surely be fined, as the woman's husband shall impose on him, and he shall pay as the judges determine. But *if there is harm*, then you shall pay life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe. (Ex. 21:22–25)⁶

This law concerns a situation that arises when men are fighting and one of them accidentally hits a pregnant woman. Neither one of them intends to do this, but as they fight they are not careful enough to avoid hitting her. If that happens, there are two possibilities:

1. If this causes a premature birth but *there is no harm to the pregnant woman or her unborn child*, there is still a penalty: “The one who hit her shall surely be fined” (v. 22). The penalty is for carelessly

6. The phrase “so that her children come out” is a literal translation of the Hebrew text, which uses the plural of the common Hebrew word *yeled*, “child,” and another very common word, *yātsā'*, which means “go out, come out.” The plural “children” is probably the plural of indefiniteness, allowing for the *possibility* of more than one child. Other translations render this as “so that she gives birth prematurely,” which is very similar in meaning (so NASB, from the 1999 edition onward; the NIV, TNIV, NET, HCSB, NLT, and NKJV use similar wording).

endangering the life or health of the pregnant woman and her child. We have similar laws in modern society, such as when a person is fined for drunken driving, even though he hit no one with his car. He recklessly endangered human life and health, and he deserves a fine or other penalty.

2. But “*if there is harm*” to either the pregnant woman or her child, then the penalty is quite severe: “Life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth . . .” (vv. 23–24). This means that both the mother and the unborn child are given equal legal protection. The penalty for harming the unborn child is just as great as for harming the mother. Both are treated as persons who deserve the full protection of the law.⁷

7. Some translations have adopted an alternative sense of this passage. The NRSV translates it, “When people who are fighting injure a pregnant woman so that there is a miscarriage, and yet no further harm follows . . .” (the RSV wording is similar, as was the NASB wording before 1999). In this case, causing a miscarriage and the death of an unborn child results only in a fine. Therefore, some have argued, this passage treats the unborn child as *less worthy* of protection than others in society, for the penalty is less.

But the arguments for this translation are not persuasive. The primary argument is that this translation would make the law similar to a provision in the law code of Hammurabi (written about 1760 BC in ancient Babylon). But such a supposed parallel should not override the meanings of the actual words in the Hebrew text of Exodus. The moral and civil laws in the Bible often differed from those of the ancient cultures around Israel.

In addition, there are two Hebrew words for a “miscarriage” (*shakol*, used in Gen. 31:38; see also Ex. 23:26; Job 21:10; Hos. 9:14; and *nēphel*; see Job. 3:16; Ps. 58:8; Eccles. 6:3), but neither is used here. The word that is used, *yātsāʾ*, is ordinarily used to refer to the live birth of a child (see Gen. 25:26; 38:29; Jer. 1:5).

Finally, even on this (incorrect) translation, a *fine* is imposed on the person who accidentally causes the death of the unborn child. This implies that *accidentally* causing such a death is still considered morally wrong. Therefore, *intentionally* causing the death of an unborn child would be much more wrong, even according to this translation.

This law is even more significant when seen in the context of other laws in the Mosaic covenant. Where the Mosaic law addressed other cases of someone *accidentally* causing the death of another person, there was no requirement to give “life for life,” no capital punishment. Rather, the person who accidentally caused someone else’s death was required to flee to one of the six “cities of refuge” until the death of the high priest (see Num. 35:9–15, 22–29). This was a kind of “house arrest,” although the person had to stay only within a city rather than within a house for a limited period of time. It was a far lesser punishment than “life for life.”

This means that God established for Israel a law code *that placed a higher value on protecting the life of a pregnant woman and her unborn child than the life of anyone else in Israelite society*. Far from treating the death of an unborn child as *less significant* than the death of others in society, this law treated the death of an unborn child or its mother as *more significant* and therefore worthy of more severe punishment. And the law did not make any distinction about the number of months the woman had been pregnant. Presumably it applied from a very early stage in pregnancy, whenever it could be known that the injury inflicted by the men who were fighting caused the death of the unborn child or children.

Moreover, this law applied to a case of *accidental* killing of an unborn child. But if *accidental* killing of an unborn child is so serious in God’s eyes, then surely

intentional killing of an unborn child must be an even worse crime.

6. Luke 1:35: The Incarnation. The angel Gabriel told Mary that she would bear a son, and that this would come about by the power of the Holy Spirit:

And the angel answered her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God.” (Luke 1:35)

Then Elizabeth called Mary “the mother of my Lord” (Luke 1:43) soon after Mary became pregnant. These verses are significant because they mean that the incarnation of Christ did not begin when he was a newborn baby, a small child, a teenager, or an adult man. Rather, the divine nature of God the Son was joined to the human nature of Jesus from the moment of his conception in Mary’s womb. From that point on, Jesus Christ was a divine-human person, both God and man. This is significant for the discussion of abortion, because it means that Christ was a genuine human person long before his birth as a baby on the first Christmas.

John Jefferson Davis writes:

In the New Testament, the incarnation of Jesus Christ is a profound testimony to God’s affirmation of the sanctity of prenatal life. . . . His human history, like ours, began at *conception*. . . . The significant point

is that God chose to begin the process of incarnation there, rather than at some other point, thus affirming the significance of that starting point for human life.⁸

Scott Rae agrees:

From the earliest points of life in the womb, Mary and Elizabeth realize that the incarnation has begun. This lends support to the notion that the incarnation began with Jesus's conception and that the Messiah took on human form in all of its stages, embryonic life included.⁹

7. Conclusion. The conclusion from all of these passages is that the Bible teaches that we should think of the unborn child as a person from the moment of conception, and therefore we should give to the unborn child legal protection at least equal to that of others in the society.

8. A Note on Forgiveness. It is likely that many people reading this evidence from the Bible, perhaps for the first time, have already had abortions. Others reading this have encouraged others to have abortions. I cannot minimize or deny the moral wrong involved in these actions, but I can point to the repeated offer of the Bible that God will give forgiveness to those who repent of their sin and trust in Jesus Christ for forgiveness: "If we confess our sins, he

8. John Jefferson Davis, *Evangelical Ethics: Issues Facing the Church Today*, 4th ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2015), 152, emphasis in original.

9. Scott B. Rae, *Moral Choices: An Introduction to Ethics*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 130.

is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). Although such sins, like all other sins, deserve God’s wrath, Jesus Christ took that wrath on himself as a substitute for all who would believe in him: “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed” (1 Pet. 2:24).

B. SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE FOR THE PERSONHOOD OF AN UNBORN CHILD

Alongside the biblical testimony about the personhood of the unborn child, scientific evidence also indicates that each child in the womb should be considered to be a unique human person. Dianne Irving, a biochemist and biologist who is a professor at Georgetown University, writes:

To begin with, scientifically something very radical occurs between the processes of gametogenesis and fertilization—the change from a simple *part* of one human being (i.e., a sperm) and a simple *part* of another human being (i.e., an oocyte—usually referred to as an “ovum” or “egg”), which simply possess “human life,” to a new, genetically unique, newly existing, individual, whole living human being (a single-cell embryonic human zygote). That is, upon fertilization, parts of human beings have actually been transformed into something very different from what they were before; they have been changed into a single, whole human being. During the process of fertilization, the sperm

From the beginning of life to the end, every human life is precious. In this accessible booklet, Wayne Grudem demonstrates that because humans were created in God's image, life should be treasured and preserved at all stages.

TOPICS INCLUDE:

- *The personhood of unborn children*
- *Abortion in the case of rape or to save the life of the mother*
- *Euthanasia and its legal implications*
- *Guidelines for difficult end-of-life decisions*

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The **What the Bible Says About** series was adapted from Wayne Grudem's *Christian Ethics* in order to equip Christians with biblical answers to common ethical dilemmas.

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