

*Rev. Dr. Varughese Philip, Ph D.  
Board Member, Hope Foundation*

## **CARING FOR ORPHANS: A CONCERN OF GOD AND CALL TO THE CHURCH**

People around us today show a high interest of care and concerns for the creation such as environment, animals, pets, plants and so on. However, while showing care for many things around us we as human being need to know the significant and spiritual act of caring for the crown of creation which is human beings. Within our limited time and resources caring for the orphans appears the great act of godliness and humanness than any other.

Orphan means a child who has been deprived of parental care, fatherless, comfortless, or helpless. UNICEF reports that every day over 5,700 children become orphans. More than 17.8 million children have lost both parents and 153 million children are fully or semi orphans. Globally 132 million children are in need of a new parents, family, shelter, and care. There are many instances that orphan children are used and abused for various reasons. It is said that each year, there are about 2 million children are drawn to sex trade, among them majority of them are from orphan background. These orphan children are offered food, money and clothing and so on given in exchange of sex for food to prevent starvation. In some cases orphans get some partial basic needs met but greater abuse is done on them. Children at that point of time may not have any long term goal, rather to survive in the present context of their struggle.

Apart from that, these children may not have any voice to raise even if they know they are abused. Hence, Family is the essential place and environment for children and every orphan to receive the love, values, safety, basic human needs, trust and grow in the environment of belonging, which is a home. Caring for the Orphan is a significant human response of the good human being and a responsibility of every Christian. For an effective care, it is essential to understand both divine and human perspective of orphan care.

### **1. Characteristics of Orphan Care**

Orphans have various needs to satisfy and sustain their lives. First, their physiological needs such as food, shelter, water, and clothing. Second, they need to feel secure under the protection of an institution, including education and health. Third, there is an innate need of love because they are born with a desire to form affectionate relationship with a primary care giver. Fourth, the social needs of protection from discrimination, unloving, and bullying and so on. Last, they need self-respect, attention, appreciation, self actualization by observing skills, and a good environment that will harness their skills and dignity of life.

In the ancient Near East, absence of father would leave his wife and children in a vulnerable situation. The man who brings up an orphan in his house is regarded as the orphan's father. It was essential that he must deal with orphans gently and lovingly. A female orphan has priority over a male orphan in regard to both support and the provisions for marriage. He who gives an orphan girl in marriage should provide her with a dowry. Certain laws relate exclusively to female orphans, such as that conferring the right to protest against her marriage while she is a

minor. When a male orphan wishes to marry with the assistance of charity, the trustees of the fund hire a house for him and furnish with all that is necessary and then find a wife for him.

In the Indian context, the parent-child relationship is the social order, which is more than the right of a child. When a child is separated from his/her parent it is not viewed as the duty of the state to provide that child with a family environment. UNICEF estimated that there were 25 million orphan children in India in the year 2007. Another study says that there are about 44 million destitute children and over 12 million orphan and abandoned children in India. India has the largest number of estimated orphans and vulnerable children in the world which is about 31 million. This huge number of orphan children needs care in the areas of physical, psychological, emotional, social, and spiritual aspect for holistic development.

## **2. Concern of God**

God cares for the orphans and He expects us to do the same. We find several references to the orphans in the Scripture. The orphans are represented in the Bible as helpless beings, a vulnerable group to whom God shows special kindness. Over 40 times in the Bible, God has commanded us to give care for the orphans, widows, and poor. Family is the best and essential environment for children. Every orphan is to know the love and nurturing of a family. Biblical records reveal that those who disobey God's concern of protection and providence will be punished.

The Lord passionately desires the protection of the orphan. God says, "*Do not take advantage of a widow or an orphan. If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry. My anger will be aroused, and I will kill you with the sword; your wives will become widows and your children fatherless*" (Ex 22:22). There is a concern to protect the totally dependent. God is "*the helper of the fatherless*" and "*the helper of the helpless.*"

Moreover, Israel was to show compassion to the poor. A portion of all that people possess is sacred and belongs to the orphan (Deu.14:28-30). God has given command to share a portion with orphans (Deut. 26:12-14). Keeping the command of God is a powerful and effective tool for evangelism. Other nations will see the compassion there by attract to the Lord because of their obedience (Deut 4:5-7).

Furthermore, God punishes the disobedient. Pentateuch reiterates continually the command to render justice to the orphans; and the oppressor is to expect severe punishment (Ex.22:21-23). God is serious about God-oriented perspective in their treatment of the orphans (Ex. 22:23-24). God pronounces curse upon anyone who denies justice to the orphans (Deut. 27:19). Similarly, In the New Testament, Jesus was also concerned about the care and comfort of the orphans. First, Jesus stated at the last supper that he would not leave his disciples as orphans but come to them in the presence of His Spirit (Jn 14:18 ). He will come to them in the person of Holy Spirit. It is this Spirit that allows Christians to call out, "Abba Father" (Rom 8:15 ). They are no longer spiritual orphans.

Second, Jesus was concerned about the Care for the Orphans. Receiving a child is to receive Christ (Mt. 18:5-10). Every single child is important to Jesus. We are expected to welcome child as a person with tenderness, warmth, care, affection and love. It means, welcome the child when

he/she is in need of any kind such as physical, material, or spiritual. He doesn't want the child to be left out, uncared or unloved. Sin that is leading a child astray is the worst unimaginable; it leads to condemnation of a worst punishment. That is, hang a mill stone around the neck and drown into the depth of the Sea (Matt 18:1-6).

Third, in addition to care, Jesus was concerned about the cure of the Orphans as well. People brought children to Jesus for prayer, but disciples rebuked the people (Matt 19:13-16). Jesus laid hands to pronounce blessings and convey healing. Laying hand is a symbol of special healing, blessing, and dedication. It indicates the need of a suitable environment for the children to grow. Jesus was concerned about the sick, hungry, outcast and those who were in the margins of the society. Ministry of Jesus was a ministry to the vulnerable of His time. In a nutshell, God is concerned about the care, cure, and comfort of the orphans.

### **3. Call to the Church**

Orphan care is a call, command, and compassionate love given to the church to respond. A religion that does not care for orphans is no religion at all (Jas 1:27). The essence of true religion is "*to look after orphans and widows in their distress.*" Church is called to care for the widows and orphans in their midst.

Moreover, God's people are commanded to care for orphans. To see an orphan afflicted, and to turn a deaf ear, is sin, and it is even rebellion against God. Reach out to help the vulnerable because they need it and deserve it. God expects us to meet the needs sacrificially and be rich in good deeds (1Tim. 6:7-19). A Christian's first duty is to care for the needs of his family, second duty is to meet the needs of the church, and third duty is to those outside the church (Gal 6:9-10).

Further, in love there is compassion to meet the needs of the people (1 Jn 3:17-18). Christians cannot close their eyes before a person who is in need. There is mercy ministry in the church and outside the church (Gal. 6:10). Paul told the church in Corinth to take a collection to help the poor in the Church at Jerusalem (1Cor. 16:1-4). Care for the poor and needy within the church is the mark of NT ministry (Gal. 2:10). Obligation of mercy ministry is individual and not church. Hiding behind a donation is not sufficient. Christians are called to preach the Gospel and it is essential to make sacrifice to advance the Gospel around the world.

### **4. Care with an Eternity in View**

It is significant to care for the orphans because of susceptibility of orphans, sympathy of humans, stewardship of believers, and saving purpose of God. First, orphans are vulnerable and there is a need to care for the vulnerable. They are susceptible to emotional and physical injury or susceptible to attack. God invites His people to the holy work of securing justice for orphans (Deut.10:18). Righteous God demands righteousness through Jesus Christ and do justice; man's good works are like filthy rags.

Second, there is a value lies within the vulnerable and victimized and there is a need to empathize and sympathize with the orphans who are created in the image of God. God wants his people not to take advantage of the fatherless. God is the Father of orphans and He hears their cries. Children of God need to sympathize with the fellow beings who are orphans, helpless,

marginalized and hopeless. Honoring the image of God in orphans brings hope to the children and honor to God and blessing to the nation at large.

Third, the people of God should share their resources with orphans. God calls His people to specifically remember orphans in their giving. Orphans are to be taken care of with the same honor and provision as a Pastor or Priest (Deut. 14:29). A portion of all that we possess is sacred and belongs to the orphan. Confirmation required “*You shall say before the Lord your God, ‘I have removed the sacred portion from my house, and also have given it to the Levite and the alien, the orphan and the widow, according to all your commandments which you have commanded me; I have not transgressed or forgotten any of your commandments’*” (Deut. 26:12-14). Stewards will be asked to give account before the judgment seat of Christ one day.

Last, orphan care needs an intention to save, redeem, and lead to salvation. Mankind, outside of Jesus Christ has no surety of inheritance; no living relationship with the heavenly Father. Christ, by His redemptive work has historically established the family ties. New birth is a spiritual birth thereby adopted into the family of God. Adoption indicates placing as son with the rights and privileges and new position. It enjoys a new relationship and has the privilege to address God as father. It requires identity with the cross.

In a nutshell, orphans are helpless, hopeless, and hurt without a family. God is concerned about the orphans. God commanded His people to care for the orphans both inside and outside the church. God asked them to protect the orphans and provide for them. God pronounced judgment upon them who ignored the orphans. It was to show the love of God whom believers serve. Jesus was concerned about the care, comfort and cure of the orphans. The church has a call, command, and compassion to care for the orphans. The challenge before the church is to empathize with the susceptibility of orphans and sympathize with them. There is a need of faithful stewardship of resources. However, the ultimate goal of the care for the orphans is to lead them to the family of God through salvation.