Understanding the Role of Prayer and Relationship with God for Christians Before and after the Death of a Child

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UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF PRAYER AND RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD
FOR CHRISTIANS
BEFORE AND AFTER THE DEATH OF A CHILD

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Dedication: I dedicate this thesis to, first of all, God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, who without direction through prayer, I would not be, at this moment, writing a dedication to a master’s thesis. To my parents, Bob and Patty Hayward who taught me how to pray and who continue to pray for me daily and to my husband, Daniel, who always supports and lifts me up.
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to conceptualize the role of prayer and relationship with God for parents who experienced the death of a child. In-depth interviews were conducted with eighteen parents (N = 18) who fall under the Protestant Christian religion. A thematic analysis was conducted, and results indicate that the role of prayer for parents before the death of a child were considered active prayers as defined by Baesler (1999) in the relational prayer theory and relationship maintenance. The role of prayer for after the death of a child for parents indicate the themes dependence on God, sensemaking, vehicle to peace and thankfulness. The results indicate that parents’ relationship with God before the death of their child was deemed as unspecific and lacking depth enough to be discussed and the relationship with God after the death of their child was noted as the relationship changed, they were closer with God and they were being carried by God. Results of this study expand on the relational prayer theory and the direct divine communication model suggested by Sigler (2014) including a discussion of receptive prayer as defined by Baelser (1999) in the relational prayer theory and of direct divine communication as defined by Sigler (2014).
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Experiencing the death of a child is a devastating experience and considered a traumatic life event for parents (Oginska-Bulik & Kobylarczyk, 2019; Martincekova & Klatt, 2017; Alam, Barrera, D’Agostino, Nicholas, & Schneiderman, 2012). Parents who have experienced the death of a child suffer within their physical (Gudmundsdottir, 2009; Lannen, Wolfe, Prigerson, Onelov, & Kreicbergs, 2008), mental (Baumann, Kunzel, Goldbeck, Tutus, & Niemitz, 2020), and emotional well-being (Gudmundsdottir, 2009), search for meaning in life after the loss (Craig, 1977; Miles & Crandall, 1983; Lichtenthal, Currier, Roberts & Jordan, 2013), and encounter grief and need of support after the death (Schwab, 1996). One way it has been evidenced that people cope with traumatic life events is through prayer (Tait, Currier, & Harris, 2016; Krause, 2009). Scholars define prayer as including “communication with God” (Baesler, 2012, p. 143) or an encounter or conversation between the human and the divine (Hernandez, 2008; Clark, 2020). Prayer has been studied in many disciplines including psychology (see Bergin, 1991; Hill & Pargament, 2008), health (see Masters & Spielmans, 2007; Bearon & Koenig, 1990), religion (see Cadge, 2009; Ladd & Spilka, 2006) and communication (see Baesler, Lindvall, & Lauricella, 2011; Baesler & Ladd, 2009). Noting a lack in research relating to prayer amongst the communication discipline at the time, Baesler (1997) developed the Interpersonal Christian Prayer theory which later he renamed to Relational Prayer Theory (RPT) to study prayer from an interpersonal perspective (Baesler, 2002). Since its creation, RPT has been used as framework to study the relationship between prayer and communication in health context, health outcomes, relationship with God, media and interpersonal outlets of prayer and

Relational prayer theory conceptualizes active and receptive prayer types (Baesler, 2002). While active prayer has been studied significantly using this theory (see Baesler, 2001; Baelser, Lindvall, & Lauricella, 2011; Poloma & Lee, 2011; Rohr, 2014), research on receptive prayer has not been as prevalent (Baesler, 2012). Various studies have been conducted concerning how parents deal with the death of their child (i.e., Price, Prior, & Parkes, 2011; Wheeler, 1994) and have used prayer as a means to deal with that death (i.e., Murphy, Johnson & Weber, 2002; Anderson, Marwit, Vandenberg, & Chibnall, 2005), however, little to no research has been conducted comparing parents’ prayer life prior to and after they experienced the death of their child. Baesler (2012) describes the potential transition in prayer types moving from active prayer to receptive prayer. According to Baesler (2012), “Several unexplored facets of relational prayer theory offer opportunities for future research including: critical events that mark the transition from active to receptive prayer, phenomenological descriptions of the experiences of active and receptive prayers…” (p. 149). Previous studies, while rare, have been conducted on receptive prayer, as defined by Baesler (Lauricello, 2019; Sigler, 2015), but no studies to date have been conducted within the communication discipline on parents’ conceptualization of receptive prayer after the death of their child. In addition, Baesler (2002) conducted a study using the RPT concerning relationship with God and found that “frequency of prayer and affect during prayer had direct effects on relational intimacy with God.” (p. 58). Because some parents who have experienced the death of a child turn to prayer during times of grief (Murphy, Johnson & Weber, 2002; Anderson, Marwit, Vandenberg & Chibnall, 2005), this study also seeks to expand the reliability of those findings.
There are several aims of this study. First, this study seeks to identify the ways in which prayer is used as a coping mechanism by parents who have experienced the death of a child. Second, this study seeks to understand if losing a child, which is considered a traumatic life event, effects a parent’s prayer type; for example, does it move from active to receptive, as defined by Baesler (1999). Prayer will be viewed via the RPT and conceptualized as a two-way communicative process between the individual (the person praying) and God (recipient of prayer message). Specifically, this study seeks to explore how parents who have experienced the death of a child conceptualize the role of prayer before and after that loss. Special attention will be given to the ways in which this communicative process (‘talking and listening’) provides perceived positive emotion/emotional states such as comfort, hope, and love to the bereaved parent. Results from this study aim to provide a better understanding of how receptive prayer, defined through the relational prayer theory (i.e., communication from God)-can help mitigate grief and enhance well-being (i.e., provide comfort) following deep and unfathomable loss. Results from this study also aim to describe the transition, if any, that takes place between the parent’s prayer life prior to and after the death of a child; and whether or not the parents conceptualize “hearing from God” as defined through the RPT after that loss. As Sigler (2015) suggests, we may not be able to predict what God will say to parents who lose children, but we may be able to describe what and how God has communicated to them by listening to parents answer questions relating to the role of prayer during their grieving process. This study also seeks to identify the ways in which relationship with God is perceived by parents before and after experiencing the death of a child. In other words, does a traumatic life event, like the death of a child, effect the perceived intimacy between the parent and God?
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

Suffering, Well-being, and Spiritual Communication

The death of a child is usually a sudden, unexpected, and traumatic event that changes a parent’s life forever (Davis, Lehman, Wortman, Silver & Thompson, 1995). Due to the extraordinary nature of the loss, it is understandable that parents suffer in many ways and suffering the death of a child can invoke many different thoughts, emotions, and meanings. What is suffering? Frank (2001) describes suffering as an absence, something that has been lost, it is unspeakable, remains concealed and “suffering is loss, present or anticipated…we suffer the absence of what was missed…the sense that something is irreparably wrong” and also notes, “anyone who suffers knows the reality of suffering, but this reality is what you cannot “come to grips with.” To suffer is to lose your grip.” (p. 355). Other definitions of suffering exist amongst scholars and include suffering as caused by some sort of traumatic event (El-Gabalawy, et al., 2020), an experience that affects a person on a psychophysical and existential level (Bueno-Gomez, 2017), and an effective or emotional response triggered by a stimulus such as a loss of a loved one (Fordyce, 1988). Suffering after loss can threaten the parent’s emotional, mental, and physical health, and be detrimental to their overall and spiritual well-being.

Probably the least surprising form of suffering after the loss of a child is emotional. Mixed emotions that accompany loss can include fear, sadness, anger, depression, relief and grief, all of which can occur simultaneously (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2014). The process of grief itself has been noted to include “anger and depression” (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2014, p. 7). Other emotional health problems involve depression (see Rogers, Floyd, Selzer, Greenberg &
Hong, 2008), anxiety (see Kreichbergs, Valdimarsdottir, Onelov, Henter & Steineck, 2004) and some psychiatric disorders (see Li, Laursen, Precht, Olson & Mortensen, 2005).

One’s mental health can also be affected. This form of suffering can be manifested through “[l]oss of memory and concentration, disbelief, sensory effects, paranormal effects, dreams and visions, a sense of loss of a future for the child, and searching for closure or understanding…” (Hunt & Greef, 2012, p. 57).

Suffering and grief after losing a child can also be manifested physically. Hunt and Greef (2012), for example, conducted a study with 22 bereaved parents and found that they suffered physically. They reported “a severe lack of energy followed the experience of strong physical [intense] pain” (p. 56).

**Spirituality and Spiritual Well-Being After Loss**

Perhaps the most significant suffering that a parent who has experienced the death of a child endures relating to the purpose for this study is their spiritual suffering. Research into parents who have lost children reveals they have asked questions like: Why?, What did I do to deserve this?, and What happens after death? For example, a study conducted by Cook and Wimberly (1983) on parents who had experienced the death of a child found certain theodicies or explanations that parents use to find answers and comfort concerning the loss, which include “being able to be reunited with the child after death, feeling like their child’s death had a noble purpose and that possibly the death was a punishment for something (the parent) had done wrong” (p. 222). The authors note that, “this type of explanation regards suffering primarily as a state of mind which is influenced by how one defines the situation” (p. 228). This is important due to its implications on how parents might answer spiritual questions they have, or whether they will turn to or away from God. In other words, parents reduce their suffering by trying to
come up with answers to their questions by giving those answers deep spiritual threads. One-way parents do this is through the search for meaning (Miles & Crandall, 1983) or sense-making (Lichtenthal, Neimeyer, Currier, Roberts & Jordan, 2013). Parents who already have some type of spiritual life search for meaning or try to make sense of the death more so than parents who do not (Wortman & Park, 2009). Also, because the death of a child is usually sudden, unexpected, and unnatural, the search for meaning is more salient and there is a need for a deep and philosophical meaning. Religious or Spiritual beliefs have been known to provide that meaning (Davis & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001). An avenue parents use through their religion or spiritual beliefs to help them understand the loss of their child is prayer.

**Defining God**

Those that pray to God have personal views of Him, describe Him in abstract concepts, and view Him through the lens of their own religious beliefs (Gorsuch, 1968; Janssen, De Hart, & Gerardts, 1994). Ana-Maria Rizzuto defined God as, “a psychological working internal model of the sort of person that the individual imagines God to be” (see Rizzuto (1970) as referenced in Lawrence, 1997, p. 214). This has also been verified recently by scholars who looked at how people view God’s appearance. Jackson, Hester and Gray found that “even people of the same nationality and the same faith appear to think differently about God’s appearance” (2018, p. 10). A recent look at representations of God, or concepts of God, included over 300 results (Sharp, Davis, George, Cuthbert, Zahl, Davis & Eaton, 2019); therefore, it would be outside of the scope of this study to give an exact definition of God. Because the aim of this study is to understand the role of prayer, the transition of prayer types, and how parents conceptualize their relationship with God and not how they view God, then God will be conceptualized as the internal model that the individual imagines God to be.
Communication with God

Scholars define prayer in many ways including “communication with God” (Baesler, 2012, p. 143) or an encounter or conversation between the human and divine (Clark, 2020; Hernandez, 2008; James, 1985). Prayer comes in many forms and holds different functions for the pray-er (see Baesler, 2012). One of those functions includes coping (see Bade & Cook, 2008). Prayer varies across faiths and may take the form of silent prayers through meditation, prayers spoken out loud in a ritualistic manner (Foster, 1992), or prayers expressed through music and art (Paul, 2006; MacBeth, 2007). Baesler reviewed 50 definitions of prayer and found most definitions had to do with some form of communication. Concepts included in those definitions include “talking, listening, sharing and dialoguing” (1999, pp. 48-49). Prayer has been used for centuries by different religions as a way to communicate with the Divine, a higher power, or with God, depending on religion (Baesler, 1999). Prayer can be spoken out loud or silently, alone or with others (Baesler, 1999). For the purpose of this study, prayer will be defined as “every kind of inward [or outward] communion or conversation with the power recognized as divine” (p. 464).

Relationship with God

Prayer has been noted as being one of the means by which Christians develop and maintain a relationship with God (Baesler, 1999). According to the Pew Research Center (PEW; 2015), “seven-in-ten Christians say they think of God as a person with whom people can have a relationship [with]” (p. 31). Furthermore, over the past couple of decades, a handful of books about a relationship with God over a performance/rules-based relationship have surfaced within the Christian community (i.e., Arterburn & Felton, 2010; Himaya, 2014; Jacobsen, 2008; McVey, 2005; Young, 2008;). A recent study (Knabb & Wang, 2019) proposed a
Communication with God Scale (CGS) that measures perceived relationship with God from the perspective of a Christian denomination. Knabb and Wang (2019) developed the CGS after conducting a thorough review of the literature defining communication with God from the Bible and various other Christian writings. The authors found a consensus in those definitions related to *communion with God* and found three sub-categories including “the characteristics of God, the characteristics of the Christian, and the characteristics of the relationship” (Knabb & Wang, 2019, p. 5). Included in the definitions of *communion with God* are terms like, “friendship, spiritual benefits, feeling loved and accepted, and communicating with God through prayer” (p. 5). In the sub-category of *characteristics of God*, it was noted that, “God draws [the Christian] closer in the relationship and God directs His fatherly love to the Christians” (Knabb & Wang, 2019, p. 5). It is also noted within the sub-category of *characteristics of the relationship* there is a “mutual investment in the relationship” (Knabb & Wang 2019, p. 5). This finding suggests that the relationship between individuals and God is interpersonal in nature. In their study Knabb and Wang (2019) noted that further research could test the understanding of the relationship between communion with God [prayer] and Christian psychological and spiritual functioning.

**Theoretical Framework**

**Interpersonal Christian Prayer/Relational Prayer Theory**

Baesler (1997) conducted an initial study to see if prayer could be considered and linked with interpersonal communication characteristics. Baesler (1997) defines interpersonal communication (IC) as “an interactive process whereby two individuals in the context of a personal relationship and particular situation, create, transmit, receive, and coordinate their symbolic verbal and nonverbal messages with the intent to share meaning with one another” (Baesler, 1997, p. 9). Baesler (1997) further defined Interpersonal Christian Prayer (ICP) as “the communication between a Christian and God” (p. 7). Baesler (1997) posits four themes that
surrounded the definition of ICP: “1) a dyadic interpersonal relationship, 2) human intentionality and motivation, 3) a certain process involved during prayer, and 4) effects of prayer” (p. 10). Once defined, Baesler (1997) compared IC with ICP and found connections relating to “dyadic interpersonal relationships, human intentionality and motivation, and the process of talking, listening and dialogue” (p. 10). The original diagram of the theory posits that God gives an invitation to communicate with us, and we either affirm or negate it. If we affirm/accept the invitation, then we engage in active prayer and through transitional variables like age or a critical life event we eventually end up in receptive prayers which ultimately leads to spiritual life. The theory’s assumptions are as follows: there is an existence of a God, that we can communicate with God through prayer, and that prayer is a private act between a human and God. Active prayer is conceptualized as a human’s effort to speak to God while receptive prayer is conceptualized as God’s communication back to human’s (Baesler, 1999; Poloma & Lee, 2011). Receptive prayer was eventually put into a category of prayer called radically divine communication. According to the theory, radically divine communication is conceptualized as: voices, rapture, ecstasy or gentle, quiet, peace-filled infusions of Divine Love” (Baesler, 1999, p.49).

**Direct Divine Communication Model**

Relational Prayer Theory (RPT) has come under critical review for its many definitions of the terms used to describe receptive prayer or God’s communication to individuals (Sigler, 2015). Therefore, Sigler posited a new model to study what Baesler calls receptive prayer into “direct divine communication” (DDC) (2014, p. 149-150). Due to underdeveloped and muddled definitions to the RPT receptive prayer category, Sigler (2013) set out to define more clearly what communication from God entails. After a review of Baeslers literature, Sigler (2015) found
the following definitions relating to *receptive* prayer: “1. It must not be observable by parties outside the communicating dyad. 2. It must be ineffable. 3. It must be an experience of loving and/or being loved by God. 4. It must not be describable using traditional communication processes such as talking, listening, and dialoguing. 5. It must focus on the activity of God (rather than the human) in prayer” (p. 73). Sigler suggests eliminating certain ideas posed by the RPT including the assumption that the intentionality of all prayer begins with God. Sigler also suggests that any form of communication from God be eliminated from the RPT model, and creating a new model in which to study communication *from* God (Sigler, 2015). Direct divine communication (DDC) is defined as “a phenomenologically intense or unusual experience that the recipient interprets without a doubt to be a direct communication from God, be it mediated or unmediated by worldly entities (e.g., other people, objects, circumstances, etc.), and regardless of whether the recipient understood/understands the meaning of the message clearly” (Sigler, 2013, pp. 149–150).

The difference between a religious or spiritual experience (RSE), receptive prayer (RP), divine communication (DC) and direct divine communication (DDC) have to do with the presence or lack thereof of doubt. For example, “any experience of God, the divine, the transcendent, supernatural, other-worldly, etc.,” qualifies as an RSE, according to Sigler (2015, p.149); whereas, DC can involve doubt, which means the receiver is not 100% sure if the communication came directly from God. As noted for RSE, the experience does not have to be from God per se, whereas in the conceptualization of DDC by Sigler, the communication is believed to be directly coming from God (through various means) beyond a shadow of a doubt in the receiver of the message.
Sigler conducted a study with Catholic women and reported the participants as experiencing DDC by “internal and external locutions; internal conversations; audible voices; mental impressions; ecstasy; and physical-emotional, tactile, multi-sensory, and circumstantial experiences” (2013, p. 60). This phenomenon was studied in its own right rather than how DDC aids within the relationship of prayer itself.

For the purpose of the current study, Sigler's conceptualization of receptive prayer by the RPT into direct divine communication would be useful. Eight criteria of the Model of Academic Criteria for Direct Divine Communication were created. The eight criteria, described as direct communication from God, include rarity (not a normal day), briefness (a moment in time), spontaneity (not planned or looking for it), not distressing (brings peace), a stronger or louder voice within (cannot be ignored), more emotionally potent (marked by intense feelings or sensations), noetic (a sense of knowing somehow deeper than everyday knowledge) and not compelling (freewill is still intact) (Sigler, 2014). The definition of direct divine communication (DDC) is conceptualized by Sigler as “communicative” and can be studied “in its own right” (2015, p. 168); therefore, the current study can be used to either support or negate that claim. As noted by Sigler, “using Baesler’s RPM to describe the trajectory and development of a person’s prayer life over time, in conjunction with the DDCM to explore how that same individual’s interpretations of DDCs change with their prayer life, may lend totally new insight into both phenomena, prayer and DDC” (2015, p. 91).

**Research Questions**

Attempting to understand the development of a person’s prayer life over time is outside the scope of this project. Rather, the current study attempts to first, expand understanding of the
transition between active prayer and receptive prayer; and second, to explore how the death of a child effects a parents’ perceived relationship with God by asking the following questions:

RQ1: How do parents who have suffered the death of a child conceptualize the role of prayer before and after the death of their child?

RQ2: How do parents who have suffered the death of a child conceptualize their relationship with God before and after the death of their child?
CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

Grounded Theory, Participants and Procedures

Grounded Theory

A qualitative study, embedded in the phenomenological tradition, using the grounded theory approach with semi-structured in-depth interview questions was designed (Creswell, 1998). Grounded theory is an approach to analyzing and interpreting qualitative data using an iterative process which involves moving back and forth between coding data, finding meaning within the data and going back to the data to search for more meaning (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2006). Grounded theory involves the process of the constant-comparative method which researchers use to code data as they search through their data multiple times, looking for categories, definitions to those categories, and then back again to the data (Keyton, 2006). Once the categories are established, the data is then scanned to see if the categories merge across participants. If the categories merge and connect participants responses then the categories become themes (Charmaz, 2006). Researchers using the grounded theory approach take a look at a specific phenomenon and analyze that phenomenon using an inductive approach (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2007). Grounded theory gives communication researchers an opportunity to ask questions about a particular phenomenon and then analyze the data to see what parts of that phenomenon become salient. It helps the researcher gather rich, as in depth and breadth, data early and is used as a flexible guide for managing the research process (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2007). Therefore, this study used such an approach.
Participants

Participants (N= 18) all noted as being raised as part of the Protestant Christian group including The Church of Jesus Christ of latter-day Saints (n = 3), Catholic (n = 2), non-denominational Christian (n = 3), Baptist (n = 8) or Church of God (n = 2). All participants (n = 18) identified as Christians or as believing in Christ. The age of the participants ranged from 26 to 65. The age of the child at the time of death ranged from 1 month to 39 years old. The type of death of the child included drug overdose (n = 1), Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (n = 1), homicide (n = 2), car accident (n = 8), and medical conditions (n = 6). Sixteen participants identified as female and two participants as male. The time range since the death took place was from 1 year ago to 46 years ago.

Procedures

Interviews were conducted with parents who have experienced the death of a child, who have had previous experience engaging in prayer before the loss of their child, and who continue to engage in prayer after that loss. This gave the researcher the opportunity to ask predetermined and open-ended questions relating to the participants’ engagement in prayer. The participants had the prerogative to divulge information freely regarding the loss of their child to the extent they felt comfortable and desired. By conducting in-depth interviews, one-on-one conversations were developed that build trust, it allowed the researcher to witness emotional experiences, and allowed for the participant to talk about the death of their child in a safe environment.

A thematic analysis was employed in order for the categories and relationships to emerge from the data. The step-by-step guide provided by Braun and Clark (2006), was employed. The contextualized-consequentialist model of qualitative research is assumed here due to its principles relating to mutual respect, noncoercion, and non-manipulation, and the belief that
every research act implies moral and ethical decisions that are contextual (Lincoln & Denzin, 1998). The recruitment, interview process, and analysis of the data in this study depend upon such a model. A protocol was developed to submit to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Florida State University before the study began (see Appendix A). Once approved (see Appendix C), participants were recruited through a Facebook post. Inclusion criteria for participation included being a parent who has experienced the death of a child, and participated in some kind of a prayer life before and after the loss. Before the interview, study participants consented through a consent process approved by the IRB of Florida State University (see Appendix B). Once consent was received, an interview appointment was scheduled at a time convenient for both, the interviewer and the researcher. Additionally, interview participants were able to deny answering any of the questions and could respond freely to a few open-ended questions.

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants either in person, telephone, or through video conferencing. The first five minutes of the interview involved small talk with the participant in order to begin building a relationship of trust and safety. A brief summary of the type of questions that would be asked was discussed, and consent to record the interview was received.

Participants were informed of the focus of each set of questions when transitioning from one topic to the next (e.g., self and child’s demographics, religion, prayer life, relationship with God, etc.). The first few questions of the interview inquired about the participant’s current demographic information and religion. Two questions were asked about the age of the participant and their child upon their death. Participants were then asked questions pertaining to their prayer life which included: (1) How would you describe your prayer life before you lost your child?, (2) How often would you say that you prayed before the loss of your child?, (3) Did your prayer life
change at all after that loss?, and (4) How would you explain your relationship with prayer before, during, and after the loss of your child? The next set of questions pertained to their relationship with God, which included: (1) how would you explain your relationship with God before, during, and after the loss of your child? and (2) do you feel like this experience has brought you closer to God or driven you further away? The last few questions were open-ended and broad in nature and included: (1) Are there any other things you would like me to know about the loss of your child? (2) Are there any feelings we have not talked about or concerns that you have, and (3) What would you tell someone who has lost a child? After the interviews were completed, several participants noted they would be willing to do a second interview, if needed.

Participants responses were transcribed word for word and the data was separated by each research question. The first set of questions in the interview that related to RQ1 include: (1) how often did you pray before the loss of your child, (2) did your prayer life change after the loss of your child, and (3) how would you explain your relationship with prayer before, during, and after the loss of your child. The responses were read several times to determine the best unit of analysis. It was determined by the researcher, the best units of analysis would be complete thoughts, statements, or insights made by the participant in order to gather as much information as possible without decontextualizing responses. The first step of the procedure was to separate the paragraphs into the units of analysis. Secondly, words were highlighted that were determined to refer to the role of prayer before or after the loss of their child. Thus, time order words such as before, then, now, and during were highlighted. This study focused on the role of prayer and relationship with God before and after the death of a child; however, it is important to note that although there is usually a period of grief or coping after a loss due to death, grief does not have a specific beginning or ending (Kessler & Kubler-Ross, 2005). After a thorough review of the
data, it was determined that the most beneficial way to conceptualize the unit of analysis concerning the temporal nature of prayer and relationship with God was to frame them in reference to before and after the loss of the child.

Codes were created based on the unit of analysis. Once the codes were created they were collapsed into categories. Once the categories were established, the data was then scanned to see if the categories merged across participants. If the categories merged and connected participants responses then the categories became themes (Charmaz, 2006). The details of this process will now be discussed.

**Coding to Category Process**

**Coding for RQ1**

The researcher created codes based on participants’ comments such as amount of prayer, dependence on God, prayer as a vehicle to God, reason for death, desire for understanding, using prayer to get back to son, and personal actions (see Table 1 for a list of all codes). The following are some examples of the coding process: “I figured twice a day there are seven days in a week, that is 14 so let’s Say 20.” was coded as, amount of prayer; “wanting to know why, why give us a child and then take it away?” was coded as questioning, sensemaking; and “well, back then I believed in God and everything but I more or less probably prayed when I wanted or needed something, um but I wouldn’t say that it was like an everyday thing for me” was coded as amount: not often; role: wants or needs. In vivo coding was also used to code some of the data. In vivo coding is a method that uses the participants’ own words as codes (Manning, 2017). The following are some examples of the in vivo coding process: “I pray a lot more because I want to do whatever it takes to get back to My son.” was coded as, role: get back to my son; and “I had a lot of problems with fear….I still have that little bit of fear…” was coded as role: fear. Once
the coding process was finalized, a chart was created with two columns and eighteen rows. The chart was created based on the initial research question relating to the role of prayer. The two columns at the top were listed as before and after. All participants names were removed beforehand to ensure anonymity, and all participants were assigned a number. The eighteen rows were labeled as P1-P18 to represent the 18 participants. The codes from each participant were then pulled from the data and placed in the chart connecting with each participant. Once the codes were in the chart, the researcher then highlighted codes that could be collapsed into a category for before the death of the child and after the death of the child. The three categories that emerged for before the death of the child are: (1) normative prayers, (2) relationship maintenance, and (3) dependence on God. Following each category is further detailed.

**Before Death Categories**

The category of **normative prayer** consisted of the codes normal, wants, needs, thanks, thankfulness, protection, safety, normal types from church, and help others. First, the codes wants, needs, safety, protection, thankfulness, and praising were collapsed into the category of normative prayers or as Baesler (2002) describes in RPT, active prayers (p.59). Active prayers types are described by Baesler (2002) as having to do with praising, thankfulness and petition. This will be further discussed in the interpretive findings chapter.

The codes that emerged relating to **relationship maintenance** included the terms conversational, closer, maintain relationship, communicate, friendship, and vehicle to God. The codes were then collapsed into the category of relationship maintenance. Once the category was established, the data was scanned to determine how many participants conceptualized the role of prayer as being relationship maintenance to determine if the category was salient enough to be a theme. It was determined that six participants \((n = 6)\) engaged in prayers before the loss of their
child to maintain their relationship with God; therefore, the theme *relationship maintenance* emerged from the data and was salient enough to support the theme. Themes will be further discussed in the interpretive findings chapter of this work.

The codes that emerged relating to **dependence on God** included words such as *dependence on God, will, happiness, and hope*. These codes were collapsed into the category *dependence on God*. The data was then examined to determine how many participants conceptualized the role of prayer before the loss of their child as dependence on God and it was determined that there were not enough participants that engaged in prayer for this reason for it to be considered an overall theme.

It was noted by several of the participants (*n = 16*) that their prayer life changed or was different than before the loss of their child. The five categories that emerged from the data concerning the role of prayer *after* the death of a child are: (1) *dependence on God*, (2) *sensemaking*, (3) *distance*, (4) *vehicle to peace*, and (5) *thankfulness*.

**After Death Categories**

The researcher collapsed the codes of *dire need, desperation, help, heal, save, trust, strength, dependence, pleadings, help me keep it together* and *clung* into the category of *dependence on God*. Once this category was established, the data was scanned to see if it was a salient theme amongst participants. Results indicate this as a salient role of prayer amongst participants (*n = 13*); and therefore, was deemed as a relevant theme to this study. The theme will be defined and discussed further in Chapter 4.

The researcher collapsed the codes of *understanding, confusion, questions, and questioning* into the category of *sensemaking* (for a definition see Chapter 4). The chart was then scanned to see how many participants’ function of prayer related to this category. Results
indicate this as a salient role of prayer amongst participants \( n = 10 \) and therefore was deemed as a relevant theme to this study. The theme will be further discussed in Chapter 4.

**Distance** is conceptualized as not wanting to be close to God or even pray or speak to God. The codes the researcher collapsed into the category of *distance* are *not thankful*, *couldn’t pray*, and *couldn’t talk to God*. Once the category was established a pass through of the data was conducted and findings were not conclusive enough for it to be a salient theme. In other words, the category could not be merged between participants.

The codes the researcher collapsed into the category of **vehicle to peace** are *peace*, *comfort*, *is son in heaven*, and *make things better*. In other words, the role of prayer was used to communicate to God in search of peace whether it be to speak with the deceased child or asking God for things that would bring the participant peace. Once the category was established, the chart was searched through to see if **vehicle to peace** was a salient theme across participants. It was deemed that because nine participants \( n = 9 \) role of prayer was related to this category that it supports the inclusion of this theme.

The researcher collapsed the codes of *thankfulness*, *praise God* and *thankful* into the category of **thankfulness**. Once the category was established, the data was searched to see how many participants were thankful and used prayer to thank God after the death of their child. It was noted that enough participants discussed thankfulness \( n = 5 \) in order for it to be considered a theme.

**Coding for RQ2**

Once the codes and themes were established for RQ1, the same process began for RQ2 concerning the participants’ relationship with God before and after the death of their child. The data was separated based on the participants’ answers to the two questions posed about their
relationship with God which are: (1) *how would you explain your relationship with God before, during the process, and after the death of your child* and (2) *Do you feel like this experience brought you closer or farther away from God?* Once the data was placed into one document, the participants’ names were eliminated to ensure anonymity and each participant was given the same number as referenced for RQ1, P1-P18. The data was then separated by the same unit of analysis for RQ1 (i.e. complete thoughts, statements, or insights made by the participant) in order to gather as much information as possible without decontextualizing responses. The goal of the first pass through the data was then to separate the paragraphs into the units of analysis. The researcher made a second pass through the data to highlight words that determined if the participant was discussing their relationship with God *before* or *after* experiencing the death of their child. 

Data was then coded, with each unit of analysis receiving a code. The researcher created codes based on participants’ comments and included codes such as *good relationship, always believed, belief, God is good, problem solver, changed, being carried, closer, deeper, different, special,* and *story* (see Table 2 for a list of all codes). The following are some examples of the coding process: “well, before, I felt like I had a fairly good relationship with God” was coded as *good relationship with God before* and “even now when I want to believe that God is not a good God I can’t believe that because the feeling was so strong and undeniable.” was coded as *strong and undeniable communication from God* and *God is good.* Another example involves a code as *God as problem solver* when participants noted, “I always believed in God and felt like he was always there for me when I had a problem.” and another was coded as *belief* when stated, “I have always been a believer in God.” Once the first pass through of the data was coded, a second pass through was conducted to ensure coding was as accurate as possible. A chart was then created
with two columns and 18 rows. The two columns were labeled *before* and *after* and the 18 rows were labeled P1-P18. The codes were then placed in the chart. Once the codes were in the chart they were highlighted for similarities to be collapsed into categories. The categories that emerged from the data concerning *before* the death are: (1) *belief* and (2) *interpersonal relationship*.

**Before Death Categories**

**Belief** is one of the categories that emerged from the data. For example, *always believed, believed, no doubt there was one, and believed but not religious* was collapsed into the category of *belief*. It was noted by the researcher that some participants felt the need to discuss a belief in God, but others did not. However, one of the criteria for participating in this study was that they had to have engaged in prayer; therefore, the participant may have not felt the need to discuss this belief. It is also important to note that because this was a requirement to participate in the study, belief cannot be a salient theme overall.

**Interpersonal relationship** is another category that emerged from the data. The codes that could be collapsed into this category were *good relationship, close family member, conversation, and close with the Lord*. Because these codes represent interpersonal characteristics, the codes were collapsed into the category of *interpersonal relationship*. Once the category was established, the data was scanned to determine how many participants discussed this type of relationship with God before the death of their child. It was gleaned from the research that only a few (*n = 4*) participants expanded on interpersonal qualities of the relationship. Therefore, what became more important was the lack of participants to discuss this relational quality (see Chapter 4 for a further discussion).
After Death Categories

Codes relating to relationship with God after the death of their child were trusting God, religion, questioning with hope, dependence on others, could not pray, being carried, fever pitch, reason, listening, learning, guilt, blamed, angry, bitter, why, knower, problem solver, God gives, God takes, nature, story, purpose, and meaning (see Table 2 for a list of all the codes). Once the codes were gathered and in the chart they were analyzed to see if any of the codes could be collapsed into categories. The categories are: (1) being carried (2) closer to God and (3) relationship changed.

Being Carried was one of the categories that emerged from the data. The codes survival, can’t talk, numb, quiet, footprints in the sand, dependence on others, dependence on God, trust He is near, others helped me, dependent, Holy Spirit prays for me, God can help me, desperate, and sustainer were collapsed into the category of being carried. Being carried does not necessarily mean being carried by God but means being carried by someone other than the self. This idea will be discussed further in interpretive findings.

Closer to God was another category developed from the codes. The codes collapsed into this category are deeper, closer, closer, and better. This category represents a movement of the participants relationship to God as moving closer to God eventually. Some participants note this closeness took time. This will be further discussed in the interpretive findings.

Relationship Changed is the last category developed from the codes. The codes collapsed into this category are different, more, changed, better, growing, and changing. Whether the change was positive or negative was not important at this juncture in the coding process but will be discussed further in the interpretive findings.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>before</th>
<th>after</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P1</td>
<td>Dependence on God, vehicle to God</td>
<td>Dependence on God, pleadings, Vehicle to Peace making, understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2</td>
<td>Normal, wants, needs</td>
<td>anger, questioning, dire need, direction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P3</td>
<td>needs, wants</td>
<td>Trust, understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4</td>
<td>help others</td>
<td>vehicle to son, worry, make things better, fear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P5</td>
<td>normal, wants, needs</td>
<td>bitter, questioning, fear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P6</td>
<td>normal, wants, needs</td>
<td>Communication, heal, save</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P7</td>
<td>protection, direction, will, closer, happiness, hope, healing, strength</td>
<td>sense making, thankfulness, healing, strength</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P8</td>
<td>dependence on God, he answers</td>
<td>questioning, doubt, thankful, comfort, peace, forgiveness, strength, is son in heaven?, mental health, confusion, questioning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P9</td>
<td>maintain relationship, normal, deep, conversational</td>
<td>normal, not surviving, desperation, pleading, help, couldn’t talk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P10</td>
<td>maintain relationship, conversational, friendship</td>
<td>peace, contentment, trust, dependence, healing, dependence on God because of others, could not pray</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P11</td>
<td>normal, wants, needs, thanks</td>
<td>communication with son, safety, help, strength, pleadings, courage, strength, communicate with son.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P12</td>
<td>maintain relationship, conversational, thankful</td>
<td>more conversational, God help me keep it together, not thankful, didn’t think to pray</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P13</td>
<td>grow relationship, praising, fear, worry, safety, protection</td>
<td>thankful, received healing, help, received love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P14</td>
<td>normal types from church</td>
<td>questioning, sense making, guilt, couldn’t pray</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P15</td>
<td>thankfulness, not dependent on God</td>
<td>questions, sense making, thankfulness, couldn’t talk to God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P16</td>
<td>normal</td>
<td>peace, comfort, strength, more purposeful, clung to it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P17</td>
<td>Normal, wants, needs</td>
<td>Comfort, peace, crying out, questioning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P18</td>
<td>Normal, not frequent</td>
<td>Questioning, comfort, vehicle to peace,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table #1-continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Before (Categories)</th>
<th>After-Categories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Collapsing wants, needs, protection, direction, fear, worry, safety, protection=Normative or Active Prayers</td>
<td>questioning, understanding, questions, confusion=sense making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collapsing conversational, friendship, grow, vehicle to God=Maintain relationship</td>
<td>Collapsing thankfulness, praising, thankful, thanks=thankfulness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collapsing will, happiness, hope, healing, strength,=Dependence on God for these things</td>
<td>dire need, desperation, help, pleadings, clung=Dependence on God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>not thankful, couldn't pray, couldn't talk to God=Anger</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2
Codes and categories relating to RQ #2:
Relationship with God before/after the death of a child

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Before death</th>
<th>After death of the child</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P1 Good relationship</td>
<td>God doesn’t make mistakes, he has a plan, surety, trust he is near, trust him deeper, deeper understanding, closer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2 Good heavenly father</td>
<td>Strong and undeniable communication from God, Knower of all things</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P3 Problem solver</td>
<td>Numb, Problem solver, need solver, God takes care of children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4 Always believed</td>
<td>I am kinder now, Dependence on God, closer, God gives signs, keeps me awake and looking (Matrix), books and people help me, others help me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P5 Always believed</td>
<td>I am kinder now, Dependence on God, closer, God gives signs, keeps me awake and looking (Matrix), books and people help me, others help me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P6 I believed but not religious, unsure,</td>
<td>Conversation, couldn’t talk, isolation, story, reason, hard time, prayed more, conversational, searching, maintenance, closer,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P7 Belief, peace, plan,</td>
<td>Sadness, overcoming, plan, religion, Meaning making, purpose, meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P8</td>
<td>Traumatic, lost faith, doubt, Break apart, God speaks, story, give thanks, Psalms 23, memory, bible speaks, gives comfort, belief,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P9 Took it for granted, normal</td>
<td>Questioning with hope, Different, sense making, search for meaning, healing takes time, Communication through music, nature, bible, growing, changing, story, gifts, awakening (Matrix),</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table #2-continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Before death</th>
<th>After the death of the child</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P10 belief</td>
<td>Dependence on others, could not pray, Holy spirit prays, different, dependent, role of prayer: comfort/peace, Child of God,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P11 belief</td>
<td>Footprints in the sand, being carried by God, questioning, Thankful, different, stopped questioning, closer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P12 Belief, close family member, conversation</td>
<td>Fever pitch, reason, dependence, survival, strength, desperate, help me take control, grief comes in waves, need help overcoming waves, God can help me, Can’t stay in control of my life, closer, priorities, so sensitive and fresh, see things differently, detach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P13 Good</td>
<td>Listening, learning, Sustainer, love God, love others, help others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P14 good</td>
<td>Slow down, changed, couldn’t grieve, guilt, blamed, Doubt, questioning, better through church, church as a vehicle to God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P15 Not dependent</td>
<td>Angry, bitter, need for understanding and acceptance, why, Changed, better</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P16 Similar to prayer, no doubt, belief</td>
<td>Applied true love of Christ, Changed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P17 believed</td>
<td>Closer, changed, dependent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P18 Believed, did not go to church much</td>
<td>Closer, changed, couldn’t have made it without Him</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories: Before death of child</th>
<th>Categories: After death of child</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Believed in God=18</td>
<td>Survival, can’t talk, quiet, survival, numb: Being carried by something or someone else collapsed into category: being carried</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good relationship: 4</td>
<td>Better, closer: Positive (17P)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More about what they did not say about the relationship</td>
<td>Changed, different (17P)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 4

INTERPRETIVE FINDINGS

Findings revealed that there were differences in the role of prayer and with relationship with God for parents before and after the death of their child. First, the themes relating to the role of prayer for parents before the death of their child will be discussed. Secondly, the themes relating to the role of prayer for parents after the death of their child will be discussed. Once the role of prayer is discussed, the themes relating to relationship with God will be discussed in the same manner. Baesler (2002) notes, “prayer exists in the context of a relationship with God, that is, prayer is the communication between the believer and God while journeying on the path [of life to heaven]” (p. 58). Prayer is an important aspect of a Christian’s relationship with God (Baesler, 1997). This is important as all of the participants for this study referenced as either being Christian or believing in Christ. Scholars suggest communicating with God through prayer is how humans maintain a relationship with God (Knabb & Wang, 2019) and is similar to how humans maintain relationships with each other (Baesler, 2002) and is therefore interpersonal in nature. The two themes that emerged from the data concerning the role of prayer before the loss of the child include active prayer and relationship maintenance. The four themes that emerged from the data concerning the role of prayer after the loss of the child include dependence on God, sensemaking, vehicle to peace and thankfulness.

Role of Prayer Before the Death of a Child

Theme 1: Active Prayer

Once the codes were collapsed into the category of normative prayers, the data was then scanned across participants to determine if this was a salient category. It was determined that 12 participants (n = 12) engaged in normative prayers before the loss of their child. Normative
prayers can be conceptualized through the lens of the participant voices. When describing their prayer life before the loss of their child, the word ‘normal’ was salient in their responses. In their responses, they referenced this type of prayer as one that is ‘typical’ or most frequently employed. However, for the purpose of expanding on existing theory, normal and/or normative prayers will be conceptualized through the relational prayer theory’s active prayer category as described by Baelser (2002) who notes that active prayers involve talking, listening, and dialoging with God and include prayer types such as “petitioning, praising, and thanking God” (p. 59). Two subthemes emerged that correlate with praising and thanking as forms of gratitude \((n = 3)\), and petitioning as a form of requests to God \((n = 10)\). Examples from three participants, of the subtheme of gratitude include (1) “I think more frequently, in the moment, more conversational, thank you, commuting every day, thankful I woke up, thankful for the day, in the drive, thank you for the day, etc.” (2) “Start every morning eyes open, pray over food, sing praises, put on praise music and that is praising a type of prayer,” and (3) “I would pray for thanks you know, thank you for my blessings, my children, ya know.” For the subtheme of requests and/or petitioning participant shared, “Well, back then I believed in God and everything, but I more or less probably prayed when I wanted or needed something” (P#3). What is important is that the participants are reminiscing the role of prayer before the death of their child. They remember this time as being different and normal as if it was the calm before the storm. For example, P#9 shared, “life was good, there were hard things that you go through in life it all felt very “normal” the things I talked to God about. No desperation or anything like that.” When participants consider their lives before the death of their child, they also think back to the way they have always prayed. Participant #10 shared, “I prayed I guess more or less when I needed something, or something was bothering me or something.” Participant #7 said, “Prayer heals you
from emotional pain. Prayer protects us.” This is important as participants recognize and believe that normal prayers, like requests to God, breed safety and protection. As P#11 states, “I always pray for him to keep my family safe.” P#10 also talks about this safety aspect of prayer, “I knew the Lord very well then [when my boys were growing up] and my prayers progressed into protection and crying out for them.” The participants’ voices reflect the conceptualization of active prayer by the RPT because they give real life examples of individuals explaining how they communicate with God through prayer by asking him for safety and protection over their family members and by using prayer to praise and thank God for the things that they have. Active prayer is applied through the requests and thankfulness of individuals towards God (Baesler, 2002). One of the aims of this study was to investigate how parents would conceptualize the role of prayer before the loss of their child. The results show that parents conceptualize one role as active prayer.

**Theme 2: Relationship Maintenance**

The second theme that emerged from the data concerning the role of prayer before the loss of the child is relationship maintenance. Relationship maintenance is defined as a relationship that has not been terminated and can also include maintaining the state or nature of the relationship (Dindia, 2003). One of the ways we maintain relationships is through interpersonal communication. Baesler (1997) created the relational prayer theory (RPT) to study prayer through an interpersonal communication framework. Baesler (1997) compared interpersonal communication concepts with a model he called Interpersonal Christian Prayer (ICP) and found the following connections: “1) a dyadic interpersonal relationship, 2) human intentionality and motivation, 3) a certain process involved during prayer, and 4) effects of prayer” (p. 10). Therefore, relational maintenance involves interpersonal communication which
can include prayer to God and is a salient theme amongst participants. For example, P#1 states, “my relationship with prayer, to prayer? Um, well, I lost my parents long ago so um, that itself lends you to, ya know, to more of a connection, needing a connection [with God].” This participant appeared to be searching for an interpersonal relationship that was lost when her parents passed away. Another participant’s voice supports this as talking about having a father figure in God, “Prayer draws you [me] closer to Heavenly Father” (P#7). In order for us to draw closer to other people in our lives we spend time with them communicating or in conversation. For example, P#9 notes, “deep conversations happen when I journal. I sit down to pray at least twice a day but then it is ongoing all day. Little short prayers throughout the day,” which makes it very conversational in nature. Having this friendship with God is maintained through conversation or prayer. For example, participant #12 talks about the conversational piece of prayer, “Prayed every day in some capacity, I see some people I grew up with who, mine seems more conversational than what I see on Facebook.” As mentioned above, one of the aims of this study was to investigate how parents would conceptualize the role of prayer before the loss of their child. Data shows that parents conceptualize another role as relationship maintenance.

Role of Prayer After the Death of a Child

Once the themes of the role of prayer before the loss of the child were established, the same process began concerning the role of prayer after the loss of the child to address the second aspect of RQ1. From this, four themes emerged: (1) dependence on God, (2) sensemaking, (3) vehicle to peace, and (4) thankfulness.

Theme 1: Dependence on God

It was determined that 12 participants engaged in dependence on God type prayers after the loss of their child. Dependence on God prayers can be conceptualized through the lens of the
participant voices. When describing their prayer life after the loss of their child, the words ‘unable to speak’, ‘numb’ and ‘in shock’ were salient in their responses. When participants discussed this time in their lives they turned to God in prayer not knowing what else to do. Therefore, dependence on God is conceptualized through participant voices as being a time when participants felt like there was no other way to turn, except to God. For example, P#1 noted, “the realization came that I am not going to make it throughout this without him” and was further noted by the same participant, “I became more, um, reliant on the Lord.” That dependence on God was further stated by P#13,

I can’t get by without spending time with him [God]…the more I depended on him to even help me get through those first days, the more that I knew that is where I needed to be…you really depend upon the Lord…you pray, you press in and you get through one day at a time, you get through the funeral…you really depend upon the Lord.

It was realized for P#10 when stated, “I couldn’t have made it without prayer, praying people or God.” The same participant discusses how this dependence on God continues even now,

I know, I know, I know, I know, he brought me through it, he continues through the holidays is God…it is a feeling of peace and contentment and just knowing that I can’t handle it, knowing that another human being can’t handle it, but I have seen God handle it.

Other ways that participants voiced this dependence on God were for strength and courage and depended on God to get them through the time when their child was on their death bed, as noted by P#6, “during it happened it was in a day about at least 100 times a day to be honest with you, that is all I did was pray when he was on life support”, and immediately after the death as noted by P#9 “during it was very desperate like when we found him, um, then it was very like I
basically pleaded for God to give us a Lazarus miracle.” This dependence on God was giving it all to God through trusting his plan as P#3 notes, “I had kind of given everything to God, he knows what he is doing.” As RQ1 included the conceptualization of the role of prayer before and after the loss of their child. The second aspect of the question relating to after the loss brought forth dependence on God as one of the roles of prayers.

**Theme 2: Sensemaking**

Sensemaking is conceptualized through participant (n = 10) voices as a role of prayer after the death of their child. Sensemaking includes participants questioning God and trying to make sense of the death of their child. Sensemaking by parents included asking God to help them understand where their child is, if the child is in heaven, if they were to blame for their child’s death, and if they were being punished. For example, as P#1 states, “if things need to work out and if they are for my benefit, they will work out. To realize there was a plan, ya know, trying to understand why she was taken.” An example of a parent using prayer as sensemaking to ask if they were being punished or if they were to blame for the death is included,

…even though I know he went to heaven, that is why I believe, why take him so young, in his prime and I will say be honest when others were so destructive and just, it is like, didn't make any sense…after the loss for a long time, um I had more questions for God then I did, like I needed answers like was it something I did, was I to blame for it or why were we being punished for something? (P#15).

As stated by participants, one of the roles of prayer after the death of their child was trying to make sense of the death through questioning God, therefore, the second theme relating to RQ1 is sensemaking.
Theme 3: Vehicle to Peace

Another role of prayer for participants ($n=6$) after the death of their child was vehicle to peace. Participants used prayer to find peace. The questions that were asked to God involved a need to no longer be suffering emotionally the death of their child. For example, P#1 stated,

I knew that the only way I was going to make it through this and the only way I could get peace back in my life again was to get him [God] involved… he is going to answer me, he is going to answer me and if we can’t know for some reason we will have peace… I just wanted peace in my life to know that everything was okay.

Other ways that participants used prayer as a vehicle to peace was through their belief in the goodness of God and because it was a part of their religious practices. It was noted by P#16 as bringing a “sweet, sweet spirit”,

Before I think I went through the motions uh during I clung to it and I think it helped give me peace and afterwards it gave me comfort and strength and I think that was the first time I ever felt the spirit really, really strong that sweet, sweet strong wonderful feeling was after his death and it just brought [peace], I prayed with more of a purpose afterwards, more sincerely.

Vehicle to peace can also be described as participants wanting and needing to find comfort after the death of their child. Because the death of a child is such a traumatic event and often sudden, participants use prayer to find that comfort as noted by P#8, “I asked God to like comfort my heart, ya know and um… I also prayed for comfort.” Participants used prayer as a vehicle to find that comfort and peace hoping that their prayers would be answered.
**Theme 4: Thankfulness**

Thankfulness is also a theme that came across in participant voices ($n = 5$) as being a role of prayer after the death of their child. Thankfulness came immediately after the death of one of the participants as stated, “prayer was thanking Heavenly Father that earth life is only part of the plan.” (P#7). Another participant stated this thankfulness came after they accepted the death, after I accepted the fact that he was not coming back, that is when I started praying and I started thanking God for 25 years that we had with him…that is when I could smile, and I could laugh, and I could think of the good memories (P#15).

Other participants acknowledge how it took time to be thankful, “Pictures, time heals, let the Lord heal you, then you start to be thankful. I counted [my sons] days. 8,701. The lord told me to do that, then I wanted to stay in a state of gratitude, I had him for 23 years” (P#10). Participants used prayer to thank God for the times that they had with their children and also were thankful to God for knowing what happens after death as noted. Therefore, thankfulness was a role of prayer after the death of their child and answers part of RQ1: how do parents who have lost a child conceptualize the role of prayer after the death of their child.

**Relationship with God Before the Death of a Child**

To address relationship with God the participants were asked two questions: (1) *How would you explain your relationship with God before, during and after the loss of your child?* and (2) *Do you feel like this experience brought you closer to God or drove you further away?*

To address the first question, participants responded with things such as, “it was good”, “I had a good relationship,” and “I have always believed in God.” Most participants ($n = 14$) did not go into great detail to explain relationship qualities. What seems to be a more salient theme is that it was not discussed much at all. Almost as if their relationship with God was not thought of as
very important before the loss of their child. For the participants that did discuss in greater detail their relationship with God \((n = 4)\), words were used such as “friendship,” “conversational,” and “relationship was close, like you would talk to someone on the phone, like a family member.” Therefore, the theme that emerged from participant voices relating to their relationship with God before the death of their child is conceptualized as unspecified. Unspecified is defined as participants not describing in great detail the interpersonal qualities of their relationship with God. Because there was a lack in codes and categories relating to relationship with God before the death of a child and belief in God was a requirement to participate in the study, there is no need to discuss the participants belief in God. Also, the participants that did discuss interpersonal relationship qualities before the death of their child was not gleaned as enough for it to be deemed as a theme for this study. This will be further acknowledged in the discussion section.

**Relationship with God After the Death of a Child**

To address the second research question, several participants \((n = 16)\) mentioned their relationship with God did change in some way after the death of their child. Some participants \((n = 4)\) noted a negative change in the relationship at first but as time passed their relationship with God got “better” or “closer.” The themes that emerged from the data as being salient and deemed important enough to discuss are (1) relationship changed, (2) closer with God and (3) being carried. Each theme will now be discussed in greater detail using participant voices.

**Theme 1: Relationship Changed**

The relationship changed theme can be conceptualized through participant voices. Participants \((n = 17)\) discussed some kind of change of their relationship with God after the death of their child whether it be positive, negative or time induced.
One might ask, what makes the change positive? Because the participants all acknowledged that they believed in Christ and were Christians it should be recognized that Christians of today speak of this relationship with God and desire to have an intimacy with God. Therefore, positive examples should include closeness with God, relationship becoming better or a surety of God’s goodness. For example, P#2 states, “now I know him as knower of all things and that he is good” (P#2), and that closeness is recognized by P#3, “I am much closer now [with God]” and as P#11 states, “he just was a lot more present during that time for me.”

As time passed from the death of the child participants experienced many emotions. Because various times since the death of their child was salient amongst the participants of this study, some participants were able to discuss this change through time. Time induced examples include statements like, “Yeah, yeah, yeah, [I am closer to God] but it took time, … you tend to lose faith…He is bringing me back slowly but surely” (P#8), and “my communication has changed, now I talk all day long to God through the Holy Spirit. That has been a growing process through the grief process” (P#9).

A negative change is described as not being able to communicate with God or being mad, angry or upset with God. Some examples of participant voices include, “after I fell off a little bit [from my relationship with God] because of doubt and questioning why” (P#14). Being angry or upset with God for losing a child is heard in this participants voice, “I lost my son, and I was upset. I was upset that he [God] would allow that to happen. Ya know, that he took him from me like I just said” (P#17). It becomes salient by participant voices that their relationship with God changed which, no doubt, makes sense considering they experienced the death of their child which is an unnatural and unexpected life event. However, one would expect that relationship to
be distanced, but salient in participant responses was a closeness with God which will now be discussed.

**Theme 2: Closer with God**

Once the category *closer with God* was established, the data was evaluated to see how many participants noted that closer relationship with God. Participants ($n = 12$) discussed this closeness with God in different ways for example one participant described it as different and deeper, “closer, it is a different kind of relationship, but it is in a way not, it is just a deeper understanding.” (P#1). Other participants actually used the words closer, “I am much closer now [with God]” (P#4), “this experience brought me closer to God” (P#5), “I am a lot closer now then I was before originally” (P#16). Other participants noted how this closeness took time and happened after the acceptance of the death of their child, “Yeah, yeah, yeah, [I am closer to God] but it took time” (P#8) and “after I accepted it, I think that is what it is, I didn’t accept my son’s death for a long time, but when I finally did then things just changed ya know and I felt that my faith got even stronger so my relationship with him was even more so” (P#17). Being closer to God meant that participants were communicating and spending more time with God in prayer. They also felt like God was helping them through a day as noted in the next Theme.

**Theme 3: Being Carried**

The last category concerning relationship with God that was most salient amongst participants ($n = 7$) is *being carried*. In other words, because participants did not know how to respond or what to do, they felt like they had to be carried by God to get out of bed each day or perform regular daily functions. This is most demonstrated by this comment by participant #11, “do you know, the poem the footprints in the sand poem, that is the only way I can describe it, he carried me.” One Participant voiced this need to be carried by talking about the drudge of just
making it threw a day, “it is just so devastating that it was more help me get through this hour, this day, this week, this month, and, and so on and so forth” (P#12).

The most noticeable difference between participants relationship with God before the death and after the death was their expansion in discussing their relationship with God. As noted earlier, participants did not expand or discuss very much about their relationship with God before the death of their child but as we can see by participant responses they spoke quite a bit about their relationship with God after. We can assume based on participant voices that the death of a child forced them into thinking about their relationship with God because they began trying to make sense of the death as noted in the role of prayer after the death of their child. What becomes salient is that a traumatic life event, like losing a child, forces participants to question their relationship with God and begin to think more about that relationship. Participants recognize their relationship with God changed, became better, closer and even some participants noted that they could not have made it without God, and they needed to be carried by Him to survive. Therefore, the answer to the second part of RQ2, how do parents conceptualize their relationship with God after the death of a child?, leads us to relationship change, closer to God and being carried.

Other Notable Findings

One of the aims of this study was to fill in a gap of existing research on the relational prayer theory. Baesler (2012) found there is a transition between active prayers to receptive prayers as we age and suggested there may be a transition from active to receptive prayers after experiencing a critical life event like losing a child. When parents were asked to discuss whatever they wanted to in the last question, parents discussed many different stories that brought them peace. Those stories included visions, dreams, nature, and stories from other
people. Some participants even noted that you [we, people] have to be on the look-out for these signs or communication from God, or as Baesler (1999) notes, *receptive prayer*. Receptive prayer is defined as God’s communication to humans (Baesler, 1999). Even so, prayer was conceptualized for this study as being “every kind of inward [or outward] communion or conversation with the power recognized as divine” (p. 464). As the data was analyzed, what became salient is that participants did not specifically say, God communicated to me through dreams, visions or nature, however what was stated is that these dreams and visions came because they were open to this other world, this world beyond life or as a power recognized as divine. One participant discussed a feeling from God that was undeniable and strong,

…”we felt very strongly, we knew we were not supposed to have our child have a transplant and that he was meant to be born to die. Even now when I want to get mad at God or believe there is not a God or believe that he is not a good God I can’t believe that because that feeling was so strong and undeniable (P#2).

A couple of participants noted a sense of being communicated with through nature,

People are going to think I’m crazy. We had this bird that would peck on the window. I could open the window and it would just sit there. Or I would come into the living room. I heard it at my office window. Tap, tap, tap. I said, that is [our child], it’s gotta be. It would just tap, tap, tap (P#5)

Because nature is a part of creation and Christians believe that God is our creator it becomes noticeable for Christian parents who have lost a child to reference God communicating to them through nature. Participant #9 noted that connection with God through nature and the impact it had,
…the first few year’s nature was huge for us with connecting with God. When I was in the most bad places then a butterfly or a bird or something would always come land near me as a reminder I had not been forgotten. Some people would say that was just coincidence. I don’t think so.

Other ways in which this power recognized as divine was discussed was through dreams and visions. For instance, P#8 recalls,

After I put my son away I felt a relief, that God had answered my prayers, that my son is with him and [I had a] confirmation. When my dad died my son came to me and he said to me just like I’m talking to you, “ha, ha, Grandaddy with me!” For him to say Grandaddy with me and I know what kind of life my Daddy lived, that gave me great relief. That allowed me to put myself a little closer to God.

P#9 shared a very special story that also supports this idea of feeling a power recognized as divine through a vision,

In my desperation, I asked God, I need to know he is okay. I don’t share this with very many people but I’m going to share it with you. One night I had a dream, I was sitting on this grassy hill, all of a sudden this giant white dove came flying down and [my child] was on the back of this giant dove and [he] slides down it and says, “hey mom I’m okay, heaven is lots of fun and I’m okay.” He had his little smirk. He was at the age where he was starting to tell jokes, but it wasn’t funny. “If you bring my iPad cause they don’t have them in heaven.” It is the only dream I have ever had about him. It was a very spiritual moment for me. I asked God that I needed this, he provided.

Another participant noted having an out of body experience after specifically asking God to see her son,
I asked him to do something and he did. I asked him to show me my son and he did. I asked him if I could see my son one more time and he did, whether it be that out of body experience which I am grateful for or even in my dreams ya know. I had an out of body experience when my son passed away, ya know. I remember I asked God because when I was going back to that day when I was questioning God, I used to always ask my son to please let me know if he was okay and this time I asked God, please Lord just one day, just let me see him one more time and that night I had an out of body experience which it felt like I was with him, I have never felt anything like that in my life (P#17).

The primary activity that is done during receptive prayer does not come from humans but comes from the Divine [e.g., God or a higher power] (Baesler, 1999). Even though the bulk of the activity is done by the Divine, a human must be aware, awake and searching for it. The results of this study suggest that a traumatic life event, as in the death of a child, thrusts parents into this awakening. Parents even discuss this during their interviews. For example, P#4 states,

…because with Him too I believe all these signs happen and God keeps me more alert than ever…I tell a lot of people, well, ya know, if you don’t see the signs, or you don’t know what you are looking for then you are going to miss the signs and I am a big sign person.

Another participant discusses this awakening after experiencing the death of her child, “I recognize things that maybe I would not have recognized before” (P#9). One participant noticed that we have to detach ourselves from the world to really see, “I am able to look at these things, they are raw and difficult but there is also like an interesting observation if I just detach my feelings or try to detach my feelings from it (P#12). P#17 states, “here in this world, we belong somewhere else, this is just a stepping stone to the next phase of our life whether that be
wherever.” Similarly, P#15 states, “this is not it; we are passing through, this isn’t it, we are just passing through, you will see them again.” Lastly, P#6 recognizes there is more to this life after he had a near death experience, “yeah, I mean I feel like I have a very strong testimony that there is more to life than what we can see the here and now.” As we hear from participant voices, once they experienced the death of their child they were open to another world. A reminder that this life is only for a moment and that there is more to this life than the here and now. I conceptualize this as living in a Matrix. In the movie, The Matrix, the main character, Neo, is introduced to a world beyond the here and now. The character can choose which world to live in; the real world (Matrix) or the fake world (the here and now). Parents who have experienced the death of a child want to believe in the Matrix because it brings them overall comfort to know that this life is only a part of the plan, their child has moved on to this other world, and that they too will go on to this other world one day to be reunited with their child.
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Recognizing from the start that it would be impossible to predict how God communicates with parents who have experienced the death of a child, this study aimed to describe parents’ conceptualization of the role of prayer and perceived relationship with God before and after the death of their child. The main research questions were: (RQ1) “How do parents who have experienced the death of a child conceptualize the role of prayer before and after the loss?”; and (RQ2) “How do parents who have experienced the death of a child conceptualize their relationship with God before and after the loss?”.

The parents that volunteered to be interviewed for this study all acknowledged a belief in God and reported that they engaged in prayer before the death of their child. Each participant, while different, were raised and brought up in some type of Christian teaching. Therefore, the results of this study pertain to individuals who identify as Christians. Based on their responses to the interview questions, along with information they shared beyond those in response to the questions, the participants conceptualized the roles of prayer before the death of their child as active prayer and relationship maintenance. Participants varied in the frequency of prayer but participated in some type of active prayer as defined by Baesler (2002). Therefore, the results of this study support Baesler’s relational prayer theory. Only a few participants noted they used prayer to maintain their relationship with God. These participants noted a friendship with God and their prayer was used as a conversational channel.

The role of prayer moved from active and relationship maintenance type prayers to dependence on God, sensemaking, vehicle to peace and thankfulness after the death of their child. Parents were dependent on God to make it through a day, wanted to know why God took
their child or if they had done something to deserve it, wanted to find comfort and peace that their child was okay, that they themselves were going to be okay, and then once they got over the shock and accepted the child’s death, the parents became thankful for the time they had with their child.

To address the findings of relationship with God (RQ2), the results indicate that relationship with God was not important enough for participants to discuss before the death of their child. This was recognized by participants unwillingness to go in depth about the interpersonal qualities of that relationship. However, after the death of their child, parents conceptualized this relationship as changing, closer with God and being carried. Parents needed to be carried because they were unable to speak and function like they normally did before the death of their child. Parents did not know how to carry on after the death of their child and needed God to carry them. Parents also noted that a change happened in their relationship with God. At first, for some, that relationship with God was fractured but eventually, for all, that relationship became closer in a positive sense.

There were several other questions to be addressed by this study using the research questions posed including: (1) does a critical life event like losing a child move a parent from active to receptive prayers as defined by Baesler in the relational prayer theory?, (2) what does receptive prayer look like for parents who have lost a child?, (3) does frequency of prayer for parents who have lost a child expedite their intimacy with God?, (4) what are the ways prayer is used as a coping mechanism for parents who have lost a child?, (5) does prayer bring positive emotional states such as comfort, hope and love?, and (6) does receptive prayer enhance well-being (provide comfort and/or reduce suffering) following deep loss? While the research
questions did provide some type of answer for all of the questions, further research should consider expanding on these findings. The answers to these questions will now be addressed.

(1) Does a critical life event like losing a child move a parent from active to receptive prayers?

Results of this study indicate that parents did not discuss hearing from God in the form of receptive prayers before the death of their child, but in their stories they provided after the death of their child such experiences were noted as visions, dreams and answered prayer. It is suggested by the participant voices that communication was received from God after the death of their child. However, further studies should directly address this question. When interviewing parents who have lost a child and the role of prayer, participants should be asked directly if they felt like the dream or vision came directly from God and whether or not they had doubt that it was from God or not as described by Sigler (2014) in her definition of direct divine communication.

(2) What does receptive prayer look like for parents who have lost a child?

Receptive prayer was conceptualized by parents as visions, dreams, signs through nature, books, and other people. Again, this is a small sample size. This needs to be further addressed and researched.

(3) Does frequency of prayer for parents who have lost a child expedite their intimacy with God?

Results indicate that participants prayer life changed and was different and eventually led to intimacy with God, however it took time. The specific question is unable to be addressed by the scope of this study because parents did not address whether or not the frequency of prayer changed after the death of their child. Parents discussed how the role of prayer changed but not per se the frequency.
Questions (4) and (5) above can be addressed through the findings of RQ1: How do parents who have experienced the death of a child conceptualize the role of prayer before and after that loss. Results of this study indicate that the role of prayer for parents after the death include sensemaking, dependence on God, thankfulness and vehicle to peace. These results do suggest that prayer is used as a coping mechanism and brings positive emotional states such as thankfulness, comfort and peace and it also helps participants make sense of the death of their child and gives them someone or something as in a higher power to depend on.

(6) Does receptive prayer enhance well-being (provide comfort and/or reduce suffering) following deep loss?

Results from this study indicate that once participants had a vision, dream, answered prayer, read a certain book, or saw signs through nature, their suffering was reduced, and it did provide comfort to them. Because receptive prayer was not specifically defined or conceptualized for the participants in this study, future research should address this with the interviewers as noted above. Perhaps during the interview process the participants could be asked specifically if they felt like their prayers were answered and if there was an element of surety or doubt. This could expand on the results of this study and the results of the model proposed by Sigler (2015) relating to direct divine communication.

Limitations

Although this investigation helped to answer the questions posed, there are some limitations that must be acknowledged. Arguably, the most prominent limitation is - that the study relied on a small sample size of participants, and therefore, was unable to reach saturation in areas including gender, race, type of death, distance since the death and age of the child at death. Further, the sample was not diverse by gender, race or other demographic factors. The
sample mainly consisted of female participants. Females tend to be more relational, so because this study aimed to understand a relationship aspect, these findings could be somewhat biased. The main race of the participants of this study was Caucasian and it is recognized that different races may conceptualize relationship with God differently.

The type of death the child experienced and the distance since the death could skew the way the parents viewed God and determine which part of the grief process they are in making it difficult for the results to indicate at which time did the parents feel this closeness with God or need to be carried by God. Therefore, future studies should try to reach saturation in these areas by specifying before the gathering of participants as to the type of death or time since death they would like to research.

Another possible limitation to this study is that the researcher is a Christian and perceives to have a close relationship with God. Therefore, participants may have felt the need to agree with the researchers’ beliefs. While the researcher did not divulge her beliefs, some of the participants live in the same town as the researcher and may have already known this about the researcher.

A third limitation of this study is the lack of intercoder reliability. Depending on the type of research, whether qualitative or quantitative, somewhat determines the level of desire for intercoder reliability. Some scholars note a need for intercoder reliability in a qualitative design (see Joffe & Yardley, 2003; MacPhail et al., 2016) and some do not (Braun & Clark, 2013; Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). Because this study did not aim to make *predictions* based on the findings but planned to *describe* how parents conceptualized the role of prayer and relationship with God after the death of their child, there was not a dire need for intercoder reliability. Also, according to Braun & Clark (2013) the researcher’s interpretation of the qualitative data is
deemed as appropriate as long as the details of the process are transparent. The goal of the coding process literature in Chapters 3 and 4 of this work was used to disclose that information and provide that transparency of the thematic analysis process.

**Contributions to Literature**

The relational prayer theory posits that prayer to a higher power (e.g., God, Allah, Jesus Christ) and interpersonal communication are similar in nature (Baesler, 1999). The results of this study indicate that prayer is used by parents to maintain a relationship, bring them closer to God, is conversational, and brings peace and comfort after an unfathomable loss like losing a child. Therefore, this study supports that interpersonal relationship quality as noted by Baesler. This study also supports the definition of active prayers by Baesler as the results of this study indicate that participants conceptualize normative prayers as thanking, praising and petitioning God as referenced by Baeslers’ RPT.

Another aspect of this study that supports prior research is the finding that parents who have experienced the death of a child used prayer for sensemaking or search for meaning as noted by several scholars previously (see Miles & Crandall, 1983; Lichtenthal, et al, 2013) and that parents who have some type of spiritual life search for meaning or try to make sense of that death (see Wortman & Park, 2009) and that religion or spiritual beliefs can provide that meaning (see Davis & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001).

Knabb and Wang (2019) noted that further research could test the understanding of the relationship between communion with God [prayer] and Christian psychological and spiritual functioning. The current study attempted to further that research and found that parents who have experienced the death of a child used prayer to deepen their relationship with God and that, in turn, helped their overall psychological functioning to cope with that loss.
The results of this study also expand the model created by Sigler (2015) concerning direct divine communication. Sigler (2013) took a deep dive into the different definitions of what Baesler describes as receptive prayer. Sigler (2015) compared the following terms: (1) Religious/spiritual experience, (2) divine communication, (3) direct divine communication, and (4) receptive prayer. According to Sigler (2015), the main difference between the four terms is the presence or lack of doubt. The current study had two participants that mentioned this “beyond a shadow of doubt” that they received communication specifically from God, however, not one participant after experiencing the death of their child voiced a doubt that there was a God. Even so, if a criterion for the communication to actually come from God includes the person to believe, without doubt, that the communication came from God, then this study expands on Sigler’s suggestion slightly. This is an area that should be further researched by asking parents who have experienced the death of a child if their visions, dreams, etc., are viewed as specifically coming from God beyond a shadow of doubt.

It is also important to note that most of the participants who shared stories of visions, dreams, feeling God through nature, and out of body experiences all fall under what Sigler (2014) suggests as criteria for her DDC model. The criteria includes rarity (not a normal day), briefness (a moment in time), spontaneity (not planned or looking for it), not distressing (brings peace), a stronger or louder voice within (cannot be ignored), more emotionally potent (marked by intense feelings or sensations), noetic (a sense of knowing somehow deeper than everyday knowledge) and not compelling (freewill is still intact) (Sigler, 2014). Therefore, the results of this study indicate that parents who shared stories concerning visions, dreams, and rare occurrences that came after the child’s death is considered RSE, DC, and DDC as noted by Sigler (2013, 2014, 2015) because there was some element of the criteria described by Sigler in
her definitions. The only aspect that was lacking was the phrase, “I have no doubt” for most of the participants.

**Application to Parents**

Based on the results of this study, it would be in the best interest of parents who have children to have some type of belief in God, as noted by the participants in this study. All participants included in this study believed in God before the death of their child, and they all noted a closeness with God (at some point) after the death of their child. While most parents do not expect to experience the death of a child it will happen to some parents. What this study suggests is that for the current participants, prayer to God, had positive effects following such a traumatic event. These findings suggests that prayer serves an active role for parents who experienced the loss of their child, and like interpersonal communication in general, it is a two-way process. That is, not only did the parents use prayer to ask God to fulfill various needs pertaining to coping with the loss of a child, but that God communicated (responded) in various ways including through dreams, visions and nature. The participants who were looking to receive communication from God, found it. They recognized that we live in a matrix and that this life is only part of the process; that we are only here for a moment, and there is more to life than just the here and now. This, in turn, brought overall comfort to these parents after such unbelievable loss.
APPENDIX A

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD-PROTOCOL

PROTOCOL TITLE:
The role of prayer during times of suffering the loss of a child.

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:
Elizabeth Bennett
Communication and Information

VERSION NUMBER/DATE:
Version #1,

REVISION HISTORY

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1.0 Study Summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study Title</th>
<th>The role of prayer during times of suffering the loss of a child.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Study Design</td>
<td>Qualitative Methods-individual in-depth interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary Objective</td>
<td>To understand the relationship between prayer and coping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary Objective(s)</td>
<td>To understand the relationship between prayer and perceived intimacy with God or (higher power)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Intervention(s)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study Population</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample Size</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study Duration for individual participants</td>
<td>1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study Specific Abbreviations/ Definitions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2.0 Objectives*

How does prayer help one cope the loss of a child? What are the roles of prayer during times of loss? Does prayer affect intimacy with God? How does the loss of a child affect intimacy with God? Does perceived intimacy with God help one cope in times of suffering the loss of a child? Does intimacy with God become affected in times of suffering the loss of a child?

3.0 Background*

Suffering. This word evokes many different emotions in different people. God. This word evokes many different emotions in different people. Put those two words together and we get an entirely different view of both. For most of my life I have heard that God is love and that God loves us but what about in times of suffering? Suffering can be chosen but most of the time it is not. In times of unsought suffering questions about who we are, why are we here, who is God, and does he really love us begin to swell within. Where is God in times of suffering? Can we continue to believe that he loves us during those times or are those times when we find our hope in his love the strongest? These are the questions I seek to answer. To better understand God through his people who have suffered. How do they find hope, and can it be found in our designer? Do Christians find more hope in times in suffering rather than non-Christians? Does the type of religion we practice make a difference in our level of hope during times of suffering? The overall goal of this research is to assess the relationship between prayer and overall perceived intimacy with the divine and does the level of intimacy with the divine breed hope in times of unsought suffering.

Prayer is how we communicate with the divine. Prayer has been linked with perceived intimacy with God. Studies suggest that as we age, we tend to pray more, feel a positive effect of prayer and rate our intimacy with God higher (Baesler, 2002). Also, as we begin the prayer process, we usually participate in active type prayers which involve adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication and as we grow in intimacy with God we participate more in receptive prayers which involves feeling loved by God, having peace and joy, receiving the fruits of the Spirit (Baesler, 2002). Critical life events could have a bigger impact as far as the types of prayers offered whether active or reflective and are felt like would lead to a faster progression to receptive prayer rather than the age factor (Baesler, 2002). The loss of a child can be considered a critical life event. Prayer has been demonstrated to help people who are suffering to cope and find hope (Ai, Peterson, Tice, Boiling & Koenig, 2004). There is a great need for us to combine spiritual practices to aid in mental well-being in times of traumatic life events (Wilson & Moran, 1998). This study’s purpose is to investigate how religion/spirituality can aid in the mental well-being of parents who have suffered due to the loss of a child in hopes that their stories will breed hope and mental well-being in those that follow unwillingly in this path.

We can find joy, great significance, endurance, genuineness, and hope in our affliction and suffering (Piper, 2011, p. 256). All suffering regardless if it is chosen or not is intended by Satan for the destruction of our faith and governed by God for the purifying of our faith (Piper, 2011, p. 257).
In Romans 5:3-5 the Bible claims “We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials for we know that they are good for us—they help us learn to be patient. And patience develops strength of character in us and helps us trust God more each time we use it until finally our hope and faith are strong and steady. Then, when that happens, we are able to hold our heads high no matter what happens and know that all is well, for we know how dearly God loves us, and we feel this warm love everywhere within us because God has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love.” (Version: The Living Bible).


4.0 Study Endpoints*

- Does level of intimacy with God determine hope in circumstances of loss of a child?
- Does loss of a child expediate receptive prayers from God?
- How is prayer life affected by the loss of a child?

These questions will be asked to participants during interview protocol. Interviews will be ongoing until all 40 participants have been interviewed and before determination of IRB.

5.0 Study Intervention

1.1 N/A

6.0 Procedures Involved

This study employs a phenomenological design with the use of in-depth interviews with parents who have suffered the loss of a child. Participants will be recruited through email invitations sent via Facebook messaging. Recruitment will be a convenience sampling.

The message is as follows:

Dear __________,

I hope you are doing well. I do not know if you know this, but I resigned from teaching this past August to pursue my master’s degree at Florida State University. I am getting my degree in Communication studies. I am currently in a class that is requiring me to do some research. I have seriously prayed to God about this research as I truly believe that he took me to FSU at this
late time in my life. The words that keep popping up as I pray about this are prayer, suffering, loss. With that said, I know that you have experienced much pain and suffering due to the loss of your child. I completely understand if this is something you would rather not talk about. I am emailing you to see if you’d be willing to talk to me about it. Your information would be strictly confidential and between us. It may be used for my research and for my final paper, but your name and the name of your child will not be used at all. The interview will be composed of very open-ended questions with the exception of some demographic information like your age, socioeconomic status, religion preferences, and race. I want you to be free to talk about what comes to mind concerning your time of suffering and loss. I understand you may need to think about this as it will require you to think about things that you may want to forget about. If you are willing to talk to me just let me know and we can set up an interview at your earliest convenience and at your preferred location. Looking forward to hearing from you.

Elizabeth

The interviews will take place at a location comfortable for the parents which may be in in their home, at a fast-food restaurant, a church or my home. A consent form will be given to the participants through email once they have confirmed they are willing to be interviewed. Once consent has been received an interview will be scheduled. The interview should last anywhere from 1 to 2 hours.

Interview questions will contain the following:

1. How old are you?
2. What is your race?
3. Marital status?
4. Socioeconomic status?
5. What is your religion?
6. How old were you when you lost your child?
7. How old was your child?
8. How would you describe your prayer life before you lost your child?
9. How often would you say that you prayed before the loss of your child?
10. Did your prayer life change at all after that loss?
11. How would you explain your relationship with prayer before, during and after the loss of your child?
12. How would you explain your relationship with God before, during and after the loss of your child?
13. Any other thing you would like me to know about the loss of your child? Any feelings we have not talked about or concerns that you have?

Participants names will be coded as to ensure confidentiality before the interview process, interview will be recorded via an audio recording device and stored in a password protected computer. All data will be deidentified.

7.0 Data and Specimen Banking*
8.0 Sharing of Results with Subjects*
N/A

9.0 Study Timelines*
Start upon the approval of IRB
Collect data: Months 0-3 (March-May)
Analyze Data: Months 3-6 (May-August)
Present Findings: Months 6-12 (August-February)

10.0 Subject Population*
The individuals that will participate in this study are parents who have lost a child.
I am specifically looking for parents who have lost adolescent or older children but if there is a lack of participation will also include any parent who has lost a child regardless of child’s age.
The following will be excluded from the study:
1. Adults unable to consent
2. Individuals who are not yet adults (infants, children, teenagers)
3. Pregnant Women
4. Prisoners

11.0 Vulnerable Populations*
N/A

12.0 Local Number of Subjects
40 individuals

13.0 Recruitment Methods
Subjects will be recruited through personal friendships and word of mouth. I personally know approximately 10 people that I am friends with who have lost a child.
The source of the subjects is through friendships and word of mouth (snowball sampling).
People who have lost a child is the requirement to be a participant.

14.0 Withdrawal of Subjects*
If participants need to withdraw from the research their information will not be used.

15.0 Risks to Subjects*
Participants may experience emotional and mental distress as they talk about the events and feelings of losing their child. Even though this is minimal risk, information for counseling
services will be provided if needed. The information is The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI): 1-800-950-6264, info@nami.org. The interview will not be solely on the loss of the child. Interview questions surround the topic of prayer and intimacy with God which should reduce some of the potential trauma to the parents.

16.0 Potential Benefits to Subjects*

The potential benefits that individual subjects may experience from taking part in this research include being able to talk about the positive effects of their religion and how their religion has brought them hope in times of suffering and loss or it may not have a direct benefit.

17.0 Data Management* and Confidentiality

Information will be stored electronically and transcribed on a password protected computer in a locked cabinet on campus. Subjects names will be coded by numbers and will not be on the data to ensure confidentiality.

18.0 Provisions to Monitor the Data to Ensure the Safety of Subjects*

N/A

19.0 Provisions to Protect the Privacy Interests of Subjects

Subjects names will be coded by numbers and will not be on the data to ensure confidentiality.

20.0 Compensation for Research-Related Injury

N/A

21.0 Economic Burden to Subjects

N/A

22.0 Consent Process

A consent form will be emailed to the participant if they are willing to be interviewed.

23.0 Process to Document Consent in Writing

I will not document consent but will obtain consent from participants using the attached form.

24.0 Setting

The interview will be conducted either in the participants home, local fast-food establishment, local church, or my home depending on the request of the participant. Potential subjects will be recruited through friendships or word of mouth (snowball sampling).
25.0 Resources Available

I personally know at least 10 people who have lost children. I will reach out to them first and then see if they know of anyone else who has lost a child. (snowball sampling). The school of communication has a dedicated room for data collection. I will spend approximately 10 hours per week on this research over the next 3 months as I collect data. I will spend approximately 5 hours per week on this research in the 2nd phase to analyze the data and approximately 2 hours per week during the 3rd phase to present the findings.
APPENDIX B

CONSENT FORM

Title of research study: The role of prayer during times of suffering the loss of a child.
Investigator: Elizabeth M. Bennett

Key Information: The following is a short summary of this study to help you decide whether or not to be a part of this study. More detailed information is listed later on in this form.

Why am I being invited to take part in a research study?
We invite you to take part in a research study because you have experienced the loss of a child and are a believer in God.

What should I know about a research study?
- Someone will explain this research study to you.
- Whether or not you take part is up to you.
- You can choose not to take part.
- You can agree to take part and later change your mind.
- Your decision will not be held against you.
- You can ask all the questions you want before you decide.

Why is this research being done?
The purpose of this research is to understand how believers in different religions cope with the loss of a child and how their intimacy with God is affected by those times. Prayer has been linked with intimacy with God and intimacy with God has been linked with hope in times of suffering, but little research has been conducted concerning prayer and intimacy with God during times of loss of a child. By understanding how believers have coped with the loss of a child could in turn help others who lose children. It has also been shown that hearing others struggles can help others cope with similar problems.

How long will the research last and what will I need to do?
We expect that you will be in this research study for as long as you like. The interview process could take up to 1-2 hours.

You will be asked to answer questions relating to your intimacy with God before, during, after and at present time regarding the loss of your child. You will also be asked questions relating to the type of prayers that you have been engaged in during those same times.

More detailed information about the study procedures can be found under “What happens if I say yes, I want to be in this research?”

Is there any way being in this study could be bad for me?
By participating in this research, you may experience emotional and mental distress as you will be reliving some of the moments that have surrounded the loss of your child.

Will being in this study help me in any way?
We cannot promise any benefits to you or others from your taking part in this research. However, possible benefits include being able to talk about the loss of your child which may include closure, emotional or mental release.
There may be no benefits to you from your taking part in this research. We cannot promise any benefits to others from your taking part in this research. However, possible benefits to others include helping others understand ways to help cope with the loss of a child.

**What happens if I do not want to be in this research?**

Participation in research is completely voluntary. You can decide to participate or not to participate.

Your alternative to participating in this research study is to not participate.
Detailed Information: The following is more detailed information about this study in addition to the information listed above.

Who can I talk to?
If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or think the research has hurt you, talk to the research team at...

This research has been reviewed and approved by an Institutional Review Board (‘IRB’). You may talk to them at 850-644-7900 or humansubjects@fsu.edu if:

- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team.
- You cannot reach the research team.
- You want to talk to someone besides the research team.
- You have questions about your rights as a research subject.
- You want to get information or provide input about this research.

How many people will be studied?
We expect about 40 people will be in this research study.

What happens if I say “yes” to being in this research?

- An in-depth interview answering questions relating to prayer, your perceived intimacy with God before, during, after the loss of your child and at present time.
- A recording device may be used to record our interview
- The length and duration of the interview could take up to two hours
- A survey form will need to be filled out
- You will be interviewed by Elizabeth Bennett
- The interview will take place either in your home or in a place you are comfortable with (e.g., restaurant, church). During governmental restrictions due to COVID-19 interviews will take place via FaceTime, Zoom conferencing or telephone only.
- The interview process will take place within the next 6 months and we will set up an appointment for the interview.

What happens if I say “yes,” but I change my mind later?
You can leave the research at any time it will not be held against you.

If you stop being in the research, collected data will be removed from the study database.

Is there any way being in this study could be bad for me?

- Mental or emotional distress

In addition to these risks, this research may hurt you in ways that are unknown. These may be a minor inconvenience or may be so severe as to cause death.

Taking part in this research study may lead to added costs to you which includes time taken away from other responsibilities.

What happens to the information collected for the research?
Efforts will be made to limit the use and disclosure of your personal information, including research study and medical records, to people who have a need to review this information. We cannot promise complete secrecy. Organizations that may inspect and copy your information include the IRB and other representatives of this organization.
If identifiers are removed from your identifiable private information or identifiable samples that are collected during this research, that information or those samples could be used for future research studies or distributed to another investigator for future research studies without your additional informed consent.

We may publish the results of this research. However, we will keep your name and other identifying information confidential to the extent allowed by law.
Signature Block for Capable Adult
Your signature documents your permission to take part in this research.

______________________________  _______________________
Signature of subject              Date

______________________________
Printed name of subject

______________________________  _______________________
Signature of person obtaining consent  Date

______________________________
Printed name of person obtaining consent
26.0 EXEMPTION DETERMINATION
February 21, 2020

Dear Elizabeth Bennett:

On 2/21/2020, the IRB staff reviewed the following submission:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Review:</th>
<th>Exempt (2)(i) Tests, surveys, interviews, or observation (nonidentifiable)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title:</td>
<td>The role of prayer during times of suffering the loss of a child.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investigator:</td>
<td>Elizabeth Bennett</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Submission ID:</td>
<td>STUDY00001050</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study ID:</td>
<td>STUDY00001050</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funding:</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grant ID:</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IND, IDE, or HDE:</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documents Reviewed:</td>
<td>Email request for interview.docx, Category: Recruitment Materials;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prayer Interview Consent Form, Category: Consent Form;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The role of prayer during loss of a child., Category: IRB Protocol;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The IRB staff determined the protocol qualifies for exemption, effective on 2/21/2020.

You are advised that any modification(s) to the protocol for this project that may alter this exemption determination must be reviewed and approved prior to implementation of the proposed modification(s).
Modifications to the research may invalidate the exemption determination (because the research no longer meets the exemption criteria described in HRP-312 – WORKSHEET – Exemption Determination).

Examples of minor changes to exempt research that would not alter the exemption determination and should therefore not be submitted to the IRB for further review include the following:

- Making administrative (formatting, grammar, spelling) revisions to the protocol, consent or recruitment materials or other study documents
- Adding or revising non-sensitive questions or non-identifiable response options to a survey, interview, focus group or other data collection instrument

27.0 Page 1 of 2

- Increasing or decreasing the number of study subjects—unless adding a new study sample such as children or prisoners or adding a new source of data or records
- Making study team/personnel changes—except a change in Principal Investigator (PI)

Examples of changes to exempt research that do require prospectively submitting a modification to the IRB before implementing changes include the following:

- Making substantive revisions or additions (e.g., change in PI; funding source; sample; source of study subjects or their data; study sites or settings; procedures, interventions or interactions with study subjects; use of any drug, device, supplement or biologic; study subjects’ time or duration spent performing or participating in study activities) to the protocol, consent or recruitment materials or other study documents
- Adding or revising sensitive questions or identifiable response options to a survey, interview, focus group or other data collection instrument
- Adding a new study sample such as children or prisoners or adding a new source of data or records
- Obtaining, using, studying, analyzing, generating, storing or maintaining identifiable information or identifiable biospecimens in addition to or in lieu of de-identified or anonymous information or specimens
- Change in study risks (e.g., impact upon study subjects; impact upon students’ opportunity to learn educational content or assessment of educators who provide instruction; any disclosure of study subjects’ responses outside of the research may place study subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to subjects’ financial standing, employability, educational advancement or reputation)
- Change in Principal Investigator (PI) or (for students) faculty advisor
- New or change in financial interest

In conducting this protocol, you are required to follow the applicable requirements listed in the Investigator Manual (HRP-103), which can be found by navigating to the Library within the RAMP IRB system.

Sincerely,
REFERENCES


Rohr, R. (2014). *A Lever and a Place to Stand: The Contemplative Stance, the Active Prayer*. Paulist Press.


Sigler, J. E. (2013). *What makes you think that was God? A comparison of the criteria used by researchers and participants in the determination of experiences as divine communications* (Doctoral dissertation, Virginia Tech).


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH
Elizabeth M. Bennett

EDUCATION

Master of Arts in Media/Communication Studies
Florida State University-Tallahassee
Spring 2021
Thesis title: “Understanding the role of prayer and relationship with God for Christians who have experienced the death of a child”
Committee: Felecia Jackson-Jordan, Jessica Wendorf Muhamad, Davis Houck

Educator Preparation Institute Certification
Chipola College-Marianna, FL
May 2007

Bachelor of Science in Political Science
Florida State University-Tallahassee
May 2001

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

High School Teacher
Hope (Health Oriented Physical Education) Instructor
Florida Virtual School-Orlando (Remote)
• Create engaging live lessons through zoom
• Communicate with students and parents weekly
• Participate in professional learning development monthly

Program for Instructional Excellence
Associate
Florida State University-Tallahassee (Remote)
• Provide instructional support to graduate teaching assistants
• Newsletter committee chair
• Help deliver training to other teaching assistants

Teaching Assistant
Media Criticism Writing
Florida State University-Tallahassee
• Provide support to undergraduate students
• Grade student writing assignments
• Create rubrics for assignments

Teaching Assistant
Public Speaking and Online Communication
And Presence
Florida State University-Tallahassee
• Plan engaging lesson plans for a speech lab environment
• Assist students in preparing speeches
  Grade student work and maintain Canvas site

75
High School Teacher  
Fall 2006-Spring 2019

Subjects: Reading, HOPE, Culinary
Calhoun County School District-Blountstown
  - Create engaging lessons with regard to state standards
  - Attend professional development meetings
  - Communicate, collaborate, plan and problem solve

CERTIFICATIONS
Florida Professional Teaching Certificate
Reading Endorsement
Physical Education subject area
Family and Consumer Science subject area
Notary

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

SCHOLARSHIPS & ASSISTANTSHIPS
2020  Program for Instructional Excellence (PIE) Teaching Associate Assistantship, $3,500
2020  School of Communication, FSU, Teaching Assistantship Stipend and Tuition Waiver
2019  James T. Willis Endowed Scholarship in Communication, $1,150
2019  School of Communication, FSU, Teaching Assistantship Stipend and Tuition Waiver

AWARDS & HONORS
Outstanding Masters of the MCS Division, College of Communication & Information 2021

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
Program for Instructional Teaching Workshop Series-FSU  Fall 2020
Making learning inclusive with universal design
Low-stakes online evaluation
Engaging learners with online activities
Enhancing teaching in virtual reality

Florida Virtual School Training Series-FLVS  Fall 2020
Improving Reading Performance for All Students
Communicating about Culturally Sensitive Issues
Plan, Create and Edit with Nearpod 101, 102
Developing a Growth Mindset

Program for Instructional Excellence Training certificate-FSU  Fall 2019
SWD: Restorative Practices-Calhoun County
Green Dot Trainer Implementation Training  
Visible Learning for Literacy Book Study  
Highly Engaged Secondary Classroom Presentation  
Mindset: the New Psychology of Success, Book Study  

Project Based Approaches INTEL-PAEC  
FISH! Book Study  

Strategies to Support the Diverse Learning Needs of All, Including Special Needs Learners  
Technology Training for Teachers  

Florida Standards Training-7 Tools  
Marzano: The Art of Science and Teaching, Book Study  
ESOL for Content Area Teachers  
Teaching Generation Text, Book Study  
Curriculum Mapping for High School  
Identifying and Reporting Child Abuse and Neglect  

NG-CARPD  

Common Core Collaborative  
SACS/CASI QAR  

Effective Practices for Increasing Student Achievement  
Florida Inclusion Network  

Reading with Dr. Oropallo  
Preparing New Educators  

Failure Free Reading PAEC  

Reading Advantage  
Reading with Dr. Oropallo  
Literacy Instructional Strategies  

Reading Endorsement  
Literacy Instructional Strategies  
ESE Institute  

Nonviolent Crisis Prevention Intervention  
CHAMPS Classroom Management  
How to Impact Student Achievement and Make a Difference  

Writing Quality Individual Education Plans/Part 1 and 2  

Spring 2016  
Fall 2017  
Fall 2018  
Spring 2008  
Spring 2007  
Fall 2014  
Fall 2015  
Fall 2011  
Spring 2010  
Spring 2011  
Fall 2013  
Fall 2007  
Fall 2016  
Spring 2012  
Fall 2012  
Fall 2013  
Fall 2014  
Fall 2015  
Fall 2016  
Fall 2017  
Fall 2018
PROFESSIONAL/COMMITEE MEMBERSHIPS

National Communication Association 2020-2021
Florida State University Program for Instructional Excellence Newsletter Chairman 2020
Family, Career, Community Leaders of America District 1 Advisor 2017-2019
Fellowship of Christian Athletes Sponsor 2008-2017
Blountstown High School Spirit Committee Coordinator 2013-2017
Student Advisory Committee Chairman 2008-2017
School Health Advisory Committee 2014-2019