“When Does a Fetus Receive a Soul?”

I had a question about the beginning of life. My wife and I have endured two miscarriages so far. The doctor says that there isn’t enough genetic info to create personhood for at least eight days and both of our miscarriages happened before a visible fetus had formed. (One when there was just a gestational sac, another when there was just an endometrium lining). We’ve always believed life begins at conception, of course, and I’ve read a couple articles on this site to that end. But when does a fetus receive a soul? Do we, CAN we know from scripture? It seems obvious that the life cycle is under way when sperm and egg meet, but at what point does the soul become infused in the cells?

Thank you for writing, and I am sorry to hear that you and your wife have had to endure two miscarriages. One of my siblings had to deal with this recently, so I know it is a difficult loss. I pray that God will provide comfort and healing for you and that he would bring compassionate friends into your life who know what you have gone through. I will provide an academic answer to your question, but know that I am sensitive to the circumstance behind your question.

I have received questions about when exactly the soul enters the body before, and I know there are several theories posited by theologians to this end. With that in mind, understand that my training is as a scientist and a bioethicist. I will tell you that the soul is not something that we can detect scientifically because science deals in the realm of the physical, and the soul is in the realm of the spiritual. We can see the physical effects of the spiritual realm, but we cannot actually detect the spiritual. Many have tried to this end with experiments that teeter on verge of ridiculous (the God Helmet comes to mind).

From scripture, especially, looking at Psalm 139 (I recommend reading the whole thing): “O Lord, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O Lord, you know it altogether.”

God has a very intimate knowledge of us, and as we see in the next few verses in this Psalm, that knowledge extends to everywhere, including the womb.

> Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence?… For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

This is a reference to being made in the womb. Even there God has this intimate knowledge of man. I think this is an important verse for your situation because it is a reminder that God was sovereign over both of these pregnancies, and for whatever reason, they were not to come to fruition. The next verse is even more to this point.

> Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there were none of them.

I was particularly struck by the “unformed substance” in this verse because you said your babies died when one was a gestational sac and the other when there was just an endometrial lining. And according to this verse, God seems to treat this unformed substance as though it has a soul.

I cannot conclude when a fetus receives a soul, but from scripture, it seems that God’s actual mechanism on this is not our concern. The point is that this unformed substance will

have/does have/has always had a soul, and we treat it as such. I also think it is reasonable to conclude from general and special revelation (that would be from what we know from observation and from the Bible) that from the time of conception the new clump of cells is a new individual. Your doctor is defining personhood as something that has the full genetic make-up of a person. Before 8 days, the cells have not formed its entire genetic structure, it's still in the process of doing that, however, those cells are also not composed of only your genetics or only your wife's genetics. In fact, there is no other genetic match to those cells, so it is a new genetic entity, and in that sense is a unique, new being.

I think it is tempting in our culture to think of the soul as a physical object that gets infused or sewn into our bodies. According to scripture, it seems to be much more complex than that; kind of in the sense that Jesus was both fully God and fully man. We are both physical beings and spiritual beings and because of the fall we have a very difficult time understanding or even interacting with the spiritual aspect. Thankfully, Christ provided a way that we could interact with God (who is spirit) again.

I usually try to stick to the question at hand, but I do want to address that if your babies had souls, then where are they now? According to Psalm 139, God is sovereign, which is comforting because you can rest in his sovereign and loving grace knowing that he has taken care of your babies.

Thank you for writing,

Heather Zeiger

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