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WHY WE BELIEVE CHILDREN WHO DIE GO TO HEAVEN

By R. Albert Mohler, Jr. and Daniel L. Akin

Few things in life are more tragic and heartbreaking than the death of a baby or small child. For parents, the grief can be overwhelming. For the minister, to stand over a small, white casket and provide comfort and support seems to ask for more than he can deliver.

Many console themselves with the thought that at least the child is now in a better place. Some believe small children who die become angels. They are certain these precious little ones are in heaven with God.

However, it is important for us both to ask and answer some important questions if we can. Do those who die in infancy go to heaven? How do we know? What evidence is there to support such a conclusion? Sentimentalism and emotional hopes and wants are not sufficient for those who live under the authority of the Word of God. We must, if possible, find out what God has said.

It is interesting to discover that the Church has not been of one mind on this issue. In fact, the early and medieval Church was anything but united. Some Church Fathers remained silent on the issue. Ambrose said unbaptized infants were not admitted to heaven, but have immunity from the pains of hell. Augustine basically affirmed the damnation of all unbaptized infants, but taught they would receive the mildest punishment of all. Gregory of Nyssa offered that infants who die immediately mature and are given the opportunity to trust Christ. Calvin affirmed the certain election of some infants to salvation and was open to the possibility that all infants who die are saved. He said, "Christ receives not only those who, moved by holy desire and faith, freely approach unto Him, but those who are not yet of age to know how much they need His grace." Zwingli, B.B. Warfield and Charles Hodge all taught that God saves all who die in infancy. This perspective has basically become the dominant view of the Church in the 20th century.

Yet, a popular evangelical theologian chided Billy Graham when at the Oklahoma City memorial service he said, "Someday there will be a glorious reunion with those who have died and gone to heaven before us, and that includes all those innocent children that are lost. They're not lost from God because any child that young is automatically in heaven and in God's arms." The theologian scolded Dr. Graham for offering what he called "... a new gospel: justification by youth alone."

It is our conviction that there are good reasons biblically and theologically for believing that God saves all who die who do not reach a stage of moral understanding and accountability. It is readily admitted that Scripture does not speak to this issue directly, yet there is evidence that can be gleaned that would lead us to affirm on biblical grounds that God receives into heaven all who have died in infancy. Some evidence is stronger than others, but cumulatively they marshal strong support for infant salvation. We will note six of them.

First, the grace, goodness and mercy of God would support the position that God saves all infants who die. This is the strongest argument and perhaps the decisive one. God is love (1 John 4:8) and desires that all be saved (1 Timothy 2:4). God is love and His concern for children is evident in Matthew 18:14 where Jesus says, "Your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost." People go to hell because they choose in willful rebellion and unbelief to reject God and His grace. Children are incapable of this kind of conscious rejection of God. Where such rebellion and willful disobedience is absent, God is gracious to receive.

Second, when the baby boy who was born to David and Bathsheba died (2 Samuel 12:15-18), David did two significant things: 1) He confessed his confidence that he would see the child again and, 2) he comforted his wife Bathsheba (vs. 23-24). David could have done those two things only if he was confident that his little son was with God. Any other explanation does not do justice to the text.

Third, in James 4:17, the Bible says, "Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins." The Bible is clear that we are all born with a sin nature as a result of being in Adam (Roman 5:12). This is what is called the doctrine of original sin. However, the Scriptures make a distinction between original sin and actual sins. While all are guilty of original sin, moral responsibility and understanding is necessary for our being accountable for actual sins (Deuteronomy 1:30; Isaiah 7:16). It is to the one who knows to do right and does not do it that sin is reckoned. Infants are incapable of such decisions.

Fourth, Jesus affirmed that the kingdom of God belonged to little children (Luke 18:15-17). In the passage he is stating that saving faith is a childlike faith, but He also seems to be affirming the reality of children populating heaven.

Fifth, Scripture affirms that the number of saved souls is very great (Revelation 7:9). Since most of the world has been and is still non-Christian, might it be the untold multitude who have died prematurely or in infancy comprise a majority of those in heaven? Such a possibility ought not to be dismissed too quickly. In this context Charles Spurgeon said, "I rejoice to know that the souls of all infants, as soon as they die, speed their way to paradise. Think what a multitude there is of them."

Sixth, some in Scripture are said to be chosen or sanctified from the womb (1 Samuel 1:8-2:21; Jeremiah 1:5; Luke 1:15). This certainly affirms the salvation of some infants and repudiates the view that only baptized babies are assured of heaven. Neither Samuel, Jeremiah or John the Baptist was baptized.

After surveying these arguments, it is important for us to remember that anyone who is saved is saved because of the grace of God, the saving work of Jesus Christ and the undeserved and unmerited regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. Like all who have ever lived, except for Jesus, infants need to be saved. Only Jesus can take away their sin, and if they are saved it is because of His sovereign grace and abounding mercy. Abraham said, "Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Genesis 18:25). We can confidently say, "Yes, He will." When it comes to those incapable of volitional, willful acts of sin, we can rest assured God will, indeed, do right. Precious little ones are the objects of His saving mercy and grace.

CONCLUSION

On September 29, 1861, the great Baptist pastor, Charles Spurgeon, preached a message entitled "Infant Salvation." In that message he chastened some critics who had "... wickedly, lyingly, and slanderously said of Calvinists that we believe that some little children perish." Similar rumblings have been heard in some Baptist circles of late. Spurgeon affirmed that God saved little ones without limitation and without exception. He, then, as was his manner, turned to conclude the message with an evangelistic appeal to parents who might be lost. Listen to his plea:

Many of you are parents who have children in heaven. Is it not a desirable thing that you should go there too? And yet, have I not in these galleries and in this area some, perhaps many, who have no hope hereafter? . . . Mother, unconverted mother, from the battlements of heaven your child beckons you to Paradise. Father, ungodly, impenitent father, the little eyes that once looked joyously on you, look down upon you now and the lips which had scarcely learned to call you "Father" ere they were sealed by the silence of death, may be heard as with a still, small voice, saying to you this morning, "Father, must we be forever divided by the great gulf which no man can pass?" If you wilt, think of these matters, perhaps the heart will begin to move, and the eyes may begin to flow and then may the Holy Spirit put before thine eyes the cross of the Savior . . . if thou wilt turn thine eye to Him, thou shalt live . . .

Little ones are precious in God's sight. If they die, they go to heaven. Parents, who have trusted Jesus, who have lost a little one, if they have trusted Jesus, can be confident of a wonderful reunion someday. Are you hopeful of seeing again that little treasure God entrusted to you for such a short time? Jesus has made a way. Come to Him now and someday you will see them again.

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