

THE ETERNAL DESTINY OF BABIES WHO DIE

Perhaps no issue in all theological debate tugs at the emotions more than the eternal destiny of a baby, born or unborn, who dies.¹ What happens to that child? The responses given to this question go to the heart of some of the core doctrines in the Bible. As parents grieve over the loss of a child, they search for answers. Can they find solace in the fact that their child is in the presence of the Lord? Or must they live out the remainder of the lives not knowing what happened to their dead child? Like any good debate there are multiple views; however, it is not necessary to live in ambiguity on this matter. The Scriptures are not silent. From God's Word believers can refute false and baseless views, then develop a biblical theology of infant salvation.

Pelagianism and Original Sin

Any view one takes on this question must come with thoughtful consideration for all of the biblical issues involved. For some, justification for infants who die going to heaven arises from a misunderstanding of original sin, the idea that all who enter into life do so not in a state of innocence, but of guilt.² This debate has raged since the fourth century when Augustine was refuting Pelagianism. Pelagius regarded man, from his beginning, as a *tabula rasa*, a blank sheet of paper, morally neutral. The sins committed, according to this view, are *acted out* by man, not something that *comes from within* men.³ Thus, the Pelagian has no problem with infants going to heaven since they are incapable of actively committing sins.

¹Although this paper will primarily use terms that refer to babies, born and unborn, it also discusses individuals who are mentally handicapped to the point they are incapable of processing general revelation and the gospel and not able to transgress willfully against God's law.

²Millard J. Erickson, *How Shall They Be Saved?* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 239.

³R.A. Webb, *The Theology of Infant Salvation* (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1907), 59.

The most important biblical text on the topic of original sin is Romans 5:12-19, which Pelagius argued teaches that if Adam's sin brought guilt to all persons without personal sin, then the death of Christ brings life to all in the same way. Adam's sin, however, did not impute guilt, but did provide humanity with a bad example to follow. Thus, it is those who follow Adam's example who are guilty.⁴ Since the infant and the unborn child are incapable of following the Adamic example there is no problem with original sin in the Pelagian view and no need for a Savior. Therefore, Pelagian thinkers have no problem with that child going to heaven.

The Bible, however, is absolutely clear on the fact that all persons are conceived as sinners into a state of moral corruption and bent toward evil. First Kings 8:46 declares that "there is no one who does not sin."⁵ In Romans 3:10-12, Paul declares that "there is none righteous, not even one . . . There is none who does good, there is not even one." John MacArthur argues, "If infants were not sinful or morally corrupt, they would not die at all! If babies were born without sin or depravity there could be no reason for their death."⁶ In lamenting his own sinfulness, King David wrote, "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me" (Ps 51:5). Clearly, David's sinfulness was a fact of his life before he took his first breath. The mountain of biblical evidence contradicts the conclusion of Pelagius regarding original sin. Romans 5:12-19 teaches that, while all men are born in the likeness of Adam are born into his sin, all men who are born in the likeness of Jesus Christ are declared righteous.

In addition, the moral neutrality of children is dismissed by observing that they need not be taught how to sin. For example, a parent does not train his child to disobey, no more than tadpoles need to be instructed how to swim. It stands to reason that if persons were born morally neutral there would be at least a few humans throughout history who would have passed the test,

⁴Erickson, *How Shall They Be Saved?*, 239-40.

⁵All Scripture references are from the New American Standard Bible, 1995 Update.

⁶John MacArthur, *Safe in the Arms of God* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003), 69.

who would have never disobeyed parents and committed later sins. However, even the greatest moral heroes admit their own sinfulness. Ronald Nash calls this “the phenomenon of human guilt.”⁷ No man, after honest self-examination, finds himself innocent. Thus, the Pelagian justification for infant salvation does not stand up to the weight of Scripture or the experience of the real world.

Sentimentalism and the Fatherhood of God

One argument for the salvation of infants is derived, not from a misunderstanding of original sin, but from a view of the character of God that He would never damn a baby to hell. Specifically, proponents argue that God the Father, in His divine love, willing only the best for His children, especially babies, would never confine any of them to hell. John’s statement that God is love is an “exact, all-inclusive and an all-exclusive definition of the divine character.”⁸ Thus, this view does not make great effort to take God’s holiness or justice into account. Instead, it correlates God’s fatherhood with His part in creation and views all humans as children of God unless they declare themselves otherwise. Since infants are incapable of making such a declaration, they remain eternally secure in God’s care. It would not be fatherly for Him to do anything but take them to heaven.⁹

The sentimental approach is definitely a more readily acceptable view of God to some. A God who loves indiscriminately is less oppressive in the minds of men than some of the traditional doctrines describe Him. However, major concerns arise regarding the whole character of God if this theory is found to be true. R.A. Webb points to four conclusions that are accepted when this view of God is affirmed: (1) God’s profound concern for the welfare of humans apparently binds His happiness in those He has created; (2) Divine election has to be redefined in the light of this new understanding of God’s universal love being extended to the entire race; (3)

⁷Ronald H. Nash, *When a Baby Dies* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 21.

⁸Webb, *The Theology of Infant Salvation*, 104.

⁹Erickson, *How Shall They Be Saved?*, 241-42.

it is inferred that God is no longer in need of propitiation or appeasement by the sacrifice of the innocent for the guilty; (4) the opportunity to be saved is not restricted to earthly life, because a God who loves persons in their earthly life would not suddenly turn around and have such hatred for them once that earthly life had ended.¹⁰

While it comforts many to think of God in *primarily* in terms of love, this approach simply does not hold up under the scrutiny of the Word of God. Love certainly is one of the central attributes of God, one with which God is equated (1 John 4:8). However, overemphasizing the love of God at the expense of His holiness, justice, perfection, and wrath is akin to conforming God to the image of man's desires. On the contrary, Paul states clearly that those who will be justified, not every person, are those who will be conformed to the image of the Son of God (Rom 8:29). The God of the Bible is a loving God, but that love does not extend to every being in every degree.¹¹ Indeed, the psalmist writes that God *hates*, an active verb, "all who do iniquity" (Ps 5:5). All men are born into sinful guilt (Rom 5:12) and "amen" that guilt with their own sinful actions (Ps 58:3). Thus, while God is love, that love does not extend to human beings by default. Instead, since the sin of Adam, the *wrath* of God is the default setting for every person, and that stays the case until he or she is made alive by God (Eph 2:3-5). Since all babies are born under God's wrath, and God is not inconsistent with Himself, the sentimental view that overstresses God's love is seen to be an inadequate theory of infant salvation.

Proof from Scripture: The Responses of David

When considering the reality of original sin and a balanced view of the attributes of God, one is left to wonder where babies, born or unborn, end up after they die. If they are unable to express faith in Jesus Christ, is justification possible? If they are born guilty, are they not then condemned with the rest of humanity which, growing up and making choices for themselves, deny the gospel? Infant damnation would certainly seem to be the case; however, there is

¹⁰Webb, *The Theology of Infant Salvation*, 110-14.

¹¹Ibid., 118.

biblical evidence of infant salvation.

The story of David and Bathsheba is most telling. He committed adultery with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite. When finding out that she was pregnant, David sent Uriah to the front lines of battle, knowing he would be killed. King David, an adulterer and murderer, was confronted by the prophet Nathan. David admitted his sin and was forgiven, yet the consequences of his sin remained. David was told by the prophet that the child of his adultery would die (2 Sam 12:13-14), and indeed, seven days after birth the child, who was born sick, did die. David had wept and fasted over the child while it was alive; yet, when it died he picked himself up and ate.

When questioned about his behavior by servants, David replied, “While the child was alive, I fasted and wept; for I said, ‘Who knows the LORD may be gracious to me, that the child may live.’ But now he has died; why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I will go to him, but he will not return to me” (2 Sam 12:22-23). Putting his theology into practice, David ceased mourning because his sorrow had been replaced by hope. David, a believer, clearly was not referring to hell when he said he would go to be with his son. Certainly, such a belief would not have caused someone to cease mourning. David was able to rise up and be confident in what he said because he knew he would someday be with his son. Here, a man who was confident that he would dwell with the Lord forever also knew that was where his son already was.

In contrast to his behavior when the baby died, David sobbed and wept uncontrollably when his wicked and rebellious son Absalom died. Even in his day of victory he mourned, knowing that he would not be reunited with this son.¹² But with his dead infant, David had the confidence to know that his child, never having the opportunity to respond in faith, was in heaven. He was clearly sure of how God viewed the salvation of infants. Not privy to the divine knowledge of who was chosen before the foundation of the world (Eph 1:4), the man after God’s own heart had the utmost confidence that his child was beholding the face of God in

¹²MacArthur, *Safe in the Arms of God*, 94-96.

righteousness and being satisfied with His likeness, just as David knew he would eventually.¹³

Other Examples of Infant Salvation

The account of David and his son in 2 Samuel 12 is not the only place in Scripture indicating the eternal fate of infant or unborn. Other passages tell of such individuals whom God had a special relationship with. Jeremiah was set apart and known by God from the womb, consecrated and appointed to be His prophet to the nations (Jer 1:5). An even greater example of “prenatal sanctification” is found in Luke 1:15, where the angel told Zecharias that his son, John the Baptist, would be filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother’s womb.¹⁴ These are examples of individuals who were clearly chosen by God for salvation before drew their first breath. If these children in the Bible could be regenerated and sanctified before they were even born, it is certainly possible that children not mentioned in the Scriptures could be the beneficiaries of similar grace.¹⁵

Escaping Damnation

After finding from the Scriptures that there are instances where the unborn or babies are regenerated, the discussion as to how they escape damnation if they never receive the Word and exercise faith must take place. How does God save babies who, from conception, inherit original sin and its accompanying guilt from Adam? Augustine and Tertullian held that because infants could not exercise faith they were subject to a “mild hell.” When later Reformers such as John Calvin began teaching on the instances of regeneration within a mother’s womb the debate increased.¹⁶

First, Scripture is clear that salvation comes by grace alone, through faith alone, and

¹³Ibid., 94.

¹⁴Nash, *When a Baby Dies*, 64.

¹⁵Ibid., 65.

¹⁶John Weldon Stagg, *Calvin, Twisse, & Edwards on Universal Salvation of Infants* (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1902), 66-67.

not of works (Eph 2:8-9). However, damnation seems to be closely linked to the works that man does. John records the revelation of the Great White Throne judgment, writing that the unbelieving dead “were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds” (Rev 20:12). John MacArthur writes, “Nowhere in the Bible is anyone ever threatened with hell merely for the guilt inherited from Adam. Instead, whenever Scripture describes the inhabitants of hell, the stress is on their *willful* acts of sin and rebellion.”¹⁷ The implication is that the Bible always connects condemnation with works of unrighteousness. Since infants and the unborn are incapable of these willful acts, they are not condemned.

These individuals are also not able to express unbelief, which throughout the history of the church has been recognized as the primary sin of damnation.¹⁸ Jesus said, “He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him” (John 3:36). Unbelief will always result in evil works, which are what will be revealed at the Great White Throne. Babies and the unborn, of course, have no basis on which to believe or not believe. Therefore, there is no basis for denying them eternity with God. It is worth noting that when God condemned an entire generation of Israelites for their unbelief in the wilderness, He spared the children among them (Deut 1:35, 39). “God had great compassion on those incapable of understanding truth,” writes MacArthur. Little children might not believe, but the fact of the matter is they cannot believe.¹⁹

Furthermore, the Scriptures seem to indicate that it is those who suppress the truth in unrighteousness that are the recipients of God’s wrath (Rom 1:18). Those who suppress the truth turn to the devil and the flesh, and their unbelief begets numerous kinds of sin and rebellion, which in turn brings about divine judgment. Paul wrote that those who suppress the truth knew God but “did not glorify Him as God” (Rom 1:21). It is clear from this passage that God

¹⁷MacArthur, *Safe in the Arms of God*, 80.

¹⁸Ibid., 81.

¹⁹Ibid., 82.

sufficiently makes a measure of His glory known through general revelation, and no person has an acceptable excuse for failing to acknowledge the glory of God and worship Him in response. Clearly, small children and the unborn are not capable of being “futile in their speculations” (Rom 1:21). They are not able to exhibit any one of the number of sinful behaviors Paul lists in the verses that follow that statement. God spoke to the prophet Isaiah about the time in a child’s life when he will neither know good nor evil (Isa 7:16). Scripture never tells of divine judgment on those who never, or cannot, know right from wrong or have the choice to love or hate God.²⁰

Even small children are capable of sin. Any father of a toddler can understand that their child is self-centered and selfish. Children throw temper tantrums, deliberately make messes of their dinner, take cookies from the jar without asking, and punch or bite other children on the playground. They tell their parents “No” when they should be obeying and saying “Yes.” These are all sinful actions, but one must ask whether or not the child is able to consider in his own heart the fact that his actions violate God and His holy law. Children might know that they are being disobedient to their parents, but do they understand that they are simultaneously committing an action of eternal consequence. Babies may act sinfully, but they do not commit conscious acts against God, and thus are not responsible moral agents.²¹ R.A. Webb notes,

If a dead infant were sent to hell on no other account than that of original sin, there would be a good reason to the Divine Mind for the judgment, because sin is a reality. But the child’s mind would be a perfect blank as to the reason of its suffering. Under such circumstances, it would know suffering but it would have understanding of the reason for its suffering. It could not tell itself why it was so awfully smitten, and consequently, the whole meaning and significance of its sufferings, being to it a conscious enigma, the very essence of the penalty would be absent and justice would be disappointed, cheated of its validation.²²

Because the small or unborn child cannot comprehend the consequence, any punishment God would mete out would have no significance. Therefore, it does not make sense for God to punish

²⁰Ibid., 83-85.

²¹Ibid., 85-86.

²²Webb, *The Theology of Infant Salvation*, 42.

in these cases.

The Bible says that all humans are in need of salvation because of the sin of Adam, but nowhere does it indicate that humans are held accountable for the sin of Adam. Instead, all persons will answer for the sins that they do. Those who die in infancy cannot be judged on such a basis because there are no such sins to speak of. Phil Johnson writes that “whenever Scripture describes the inhabitants of hell, it always does so with lists of sins and abominations they have deliberately committed.”²³ The biblical evidence points to the damnation of those who have consciously transgressed the law of God. Infants and the unborn are excluded from that group.

Concluding Thoughts

With the evidence pointing toward the idea that all infants and unborn who die are excluded from judgment and included in heaven, the method of their inclusion remains at issue. The Bible indicates that no man is saved by the works that he does, but by grace alone (Rom 3:20; Eph 2:8-9). It is by grace that God has saved sinners throughout all of human history, not just in the New Testament (Gen 15:6). Scripture is explicit that there is no other way to come into God’s favor (Rom 3:21-26). In addition, there is no place in God’s Word that teaches the damnation of infants and unborn. On the contrary, every biblical reference to the issue, whether explicit or implicit, gives reason to believe they go directly into the presence of God when they physically die.²⁴

That being the case, infants are saved by the grace of God through the finished, redemptive work of Jesus Christ the way every other human inhabitant of heaven is. All babies are in need of a Savior because of the guilt of Adam; however, they are innocent of personal sinful deeds, rebellious acts, and unbelief.²⁵ These individuals do not reach the state where they

²³Phil Johnson, “What About Infants Who Die?” (from unpublished sermon notes, 1999), in MacArthur, *Safe in the Arms of God*, 87-88.

²⁴MacArthur, *Safe in the Arms of God*, 89.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 90.

comprehend revelation and have the ability to choose or reject the gospel. Thus, they are not condemned and God has provided them the one and only Savior. As a result, one is left to conclude that all infants, unborn, and mentally incapable who die before reaching a state of accountability are among the elect, whom God graciously receives into His glorious presence at the moment of physical death (2 Tim 2:10).

Just as David's dead infant son went to a place where he would one day be joined by his earthly father (2 Sam 12:23), all infants who die in that state go to heaven. Just as Jeremiah was known by God, consecrated from his mother's womb, and appointed a prophet to the nations (Jer 1:5), all babies who die are known by God and ultimately glorified with Him (Rom 8:30). Just as John the Baptist was full of the Holy Spirit while still inside the body of Elizabeth, all of the unborn who die are washed from their inherited sinful state by the regenerating and renewing of the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5). Thus, when asked what the eternal destiny of one of these who die is, one can answer with biblical confidence as MacArthur does, "Instant heaven."²⁶

²⁶Ibid., 1.

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