

Do Infants Who Die Go to Heaven?

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 pastor, 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 are not sufficient for those who live under the authority of God's Word. We must, if possible, find out what God has said. After considering the relevant data, it is my conclusion that infants who die (and other individuals who never come to a point of full moral consciousness) do go to heaven at death. Several lines of evidence lead to this conclusion.

1. The biblical principle of personal accountability. James 4:17 says, "Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin." The Bible is clear that we are all born with a sin nature as a result of being in Adam (Rom 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 (Deut 1:30; Isa 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.

To those who were offended at His teaching and asked if He thought they were blind—he said, "If you were blind, you would have no sin; but since you say, 'We see,' your sin remains" (John 9:41). In other words, if a person lacks the natural capacity to see the revelation of God's will or God's glory then that person's sin would not remain—God would not bring the person into final judgment for not believing what he had no natural capacity to see.

Another text that confirms this principle is Rom 1:20 where Paul is dealing with persons who have not heard the gospel and have no access to it, but who do have access to the revelation of God's glory in nature: Romans 1:20 "Since the creation of the world God's invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse." In other words: if a person did not have access to the revelation of God's glory—did not have the natural capacity to see it and understand it, then Paul implies they would have an excuse at the judgment. The point for us is that even though we human beings are under the penalty of everlasting judgment and death because of the fall of our race into sin and the sinful nature that we all have, nevertheless God only executes this judgment on those who have the natural capacity to see his glory and understand his will, and refuse to embrace it as their treasure.

In the gospel of John, we find two passages that emphasize this principle: "He who believes in Him [Jesus Christ] is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God" (3:18). "He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey [i.e., believe] the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him" (3:36). The Bible is clear; men and women are not sentenced to hell for their sinfulness, but for a failure to believe. The death of Jesus Christ paid the penalty for every sin that was ever committed by every person (1 John 2:2). Therefore, when a man or woman rejects the Lord Jesus by refusing to trust in Him as his/her substitution, Jesus grants that person his will (eternal separation from Him). Man chooses hell (see Rom 1:18-32; Rev 20:11-15). But in the case of an infant, we are not talking about an "unbeliever" (i.e., a rejecter of Christ); we are talking about a person who is unable to believe.

2. The character and attributes of God. It is not within the scope of this paper to delve into a study of the personhood of God, yet it is unthinkable to not bring up several of His attributes that provide a strong basis of support for the above thesis. Without imposing human ideas on these divine characteristics, it would seem incongruous with the very nature of God if any who *can't believe* die and go to hell. The perfect quality of God's wisdom, love, mercy, grace, goodness, justice, holiness, and wrath seem to prohibit us from considering this possibility. God is love (1 John 4:8) and desires that all be saved (1 Tim 2:4). Thus, 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.

3. The attitude expressed by Jesus toward small children. Many, many times the words "children" and "child" appear in the Bible. From many of these references it can be demonstrated that little ones have a definite place in the great heart of God and in His sovereign plan. During His earthly ministry, Jesus was always kind and compassionate to small children. In spite of what others thought and said, Jesus prioritized infants and small children as the following verses from Matthew's gospel reveal, "Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven" (18:3). "But Jesus said, 'Let the children alone, and do not hinder them from coming to Me; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these'" (19:14). "But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a heavy millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea" (18:6). "So it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones perish" (18:14).

4. The fact that little children have angels assigned to them. Matthew 18:10 states "See that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that their angels in heaven continually see the face of My Father who is in heaven." It is clear from this verse that under divine guidance holy angels perform a ministry of behalf of "these little ones." They represent them before God. This truth lends strong support to the fact of their salvation. Just as a good shepherd is concerned for all his sheep and does all in his power to rescue even one who goes astray, so God is vitally concerned with all His own (Matt 18:12-13). The shepherd does not want to lose any of his sheep. Jesus said it is that way with His heavenly Father (Matt 18:14). Just as the shepherd in Jesus' illustration could not let his wandering sheep perish, so the eternal God in heaven would not will that one of His little ones should perish. When Jesus said these words, He was still talking about little children like the one in His arms.

5. The statement of 2 Samuel 12:23. "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 12:23). This verse clearly affirms that David believes that one day he will be reunited with his infant son in heaven. Some argue that David's declaration is a reference to the reality that he would one day join his son in death. Yet, the context strongly suggests otherwise. Why would David worship in the house of the Lord (2 Sam 12:19-20), if the death of his son only reminded him of his own future death? How could he comfort his wife Bathsheba if his son was gone forever (12:23-24)? Another difficulty is David's contrasting attitude when his son Absalom died. When David heard of his Absalom's death, he was grief-stricken and wept bitterly. He even wished he could have died instead of his son (2 Sam 18:33). David was not certain of Absalom's salvation and therefore of his future. But of the infant son who died he was sure. This assurance caused him to turn from grief to worshipful prayer. Note: Jonah 4:11 refers to "more than 120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand." It has been suggested that these individuals are small children who have not reached the age of moral accountability. While this is possible, contextually, this verse seems to be in reference to the spiritual ignorance of the Ninevites. So I would be hesitant to use this passage to support the above view. I mention it for your awareness.

6. The great multitude in heaven (Rev 7:9). Scripture affirms that the number of saved souls is very great. 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.”

7. The election/sanctification of certain infants in the womb (1 Sam 1:8-2:21; Jer 1:5; Luke 1:15). John the Baptist was filled with the Spirit while yet in his mother’s womb (Luke 1:15). In Luke’s theology, being filled with the Spirit is consistently seen as an aspect of the Spirit’s work among those who are regenerate (Luke 1:41, 67; Acts 2:4; 4:8, 31; 6:3, 5; 9:17; 11:24). This certainly affirms the salvation of some infants and repudiates the view that only baptized babies are assured of heaven.

Hundreds of years before John the Baptist, David wrote: “Yet You are He who brought me forth from the womb; You made me trust when upon my mother’s breasts. Upon You I was cast from birth; You have been my God from my mother’s womb” (Ps 22:9-10). Because of David’s apparent mention of having faith in God while still an infant, some have concluded that God saves infants by giving them a “primitive” form of faith. That conclusion, however, is not necessary to our point; the main thing to see in this passage is that David evidently was in a saving relationship with God from his mother’s womb.

These verses make it very unlikely that all infants who die are lost. If God saved John the Baptist and David in infancy, surely we are warranted in concluding that He has saved others in infancy that were not given the opportunity to grow up. Yet, it would also be unwarranted to conclude from these texts that all who die in infancy are saved. This is just one point of argumentation. The regeneration of infants does not seem to be God’s usual way of working; we must keep in mind that “the wicked are estranged from the womb; they go astray from birth, speaking lies” (Ps 58:3; cf. Ps 51:5).

Conclusion: Babies who die **DO** go to heaven! Nevertheless, they do not go to heaven because they are “innocent” and haven’t sinned against God. They are guilty! The Bible is crystal clear that because of the fall (Gen 3:1-24), all humans are born spiritually dead in Adam (Rom 5:12-21). Paul even states that we are “by nature children of wrath” (Eph 2:3). Therefore, those who are incapable of trusting Christ are saved solely because of God’s grace. Although they are both spiritually dead and wholly unable to believe; God in His grace applies the benefits of Christ’s death to them. Theologically speaking, I would affirm that all babies who die are “elect” that is God’s unconditional choice included them in the set of the saved. Although this is just a hypothesis, it seems to me that babies will grow up in the kingdom (either immediately, or over time) and will by God’s grace come to faith so that their justification is by faith alone just like ours. After all, there are no loose ends in God’s plan!