

WHAT ABOUT THE CHILDREN?

Selected Scriptures

In this lesson we learn what happens to children who die before the age of accountability.

OUTLINE

There is no grief as deep as that of a parent who loses a child—at any age. But when a child dies as an infant or at a young age, how does God view their eternal destiny? The Bible gives assurance to all parents who lose a child prior to the child being able to place faith in Christ.

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OVERVIEW

After seminary my first pastoral duties were in a large church in Haddon Heights, New Jersey, where I served as Youth Pastor and Christian Education Director. Not long after my wife and I arrived at the church, the senior pastor took a few days of vacation and left me in charge of almost everything. This was a pretty scary assignment for someone fresh out of seminary, but I didn't realize exactly how scary it was about to get.

During those days when the pastor was gone, his secretary called me and asked me to pay a visit to a young couple in the church. They had lost their infant daughter to crib death—the baby had died mysteriously in her sleep. My job was to comfort and encourage them in their hour of grief, and the heart of this lesson is what I shared with them that day.

I can't think of anything more agonizing than the death of a child. Someone has said that the death of a child is like putting a period before the sentence is even finished.¹ If the loss of a child isn't grievous enough, then comes the question of that child's eternal destiny. In this lesson we will look at four reasons for believing that all infants and small children who die go straight to heaven.

THE CHARACTER OF GOD

The first reason is the character of God Himself, not the least of which is the fact that He is called "Father" in the Bible (Romans 8:15). That is an initial clue as to how He regards the helpless and innocent among us.

God is compassionate, gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in mercy and truth (Psalm 86:15). He is also "good to all, and His tender mercies are over all His works" (Psalm 145:9). These traits of God tell us He would never judge anyone unjustly, such as children who don't have the ability to understand the Gospel. Some say this should also exclude adults who have not heard the Gospel, but Romans 1 and Psalm 19 tell us that the evidence of God in nature surrounds us and holds all men accountable. But babies are different—they cannot understand language, reason, or the evidence in nature.

Interestingly, when the people of Israel were held accountable for not trusting God to give them victory going into the Promised Land, their children were not: "Moreover your little ones and your

children . . . who today have no knowledge of good and evil, they shall go in there; to them I will give it, and they shall possess it" (Deuteronomy 1:39). The adults were penalized for their unbelief, but the children were not.

Another example is the 120,000 children of Nineveh (Jonah 4:11). Though the Ninevites were a cruel people, deserving of judgment, God had mercy on the city because of the large number of children "who [could not] discern between their right hand and their left." God's justice accounts for those not able to believe.

In Ezekiel 16:20, God refers to children as His, and in Jeremiah 2:34 and 19:4 refers to them as "innocents." Yes, children are born into sin just like everyone else, but their sins are not willful and premeditated. Thus He calls them "innocents."

God is compassionate and merciful and does not judge children who lack the ability themselves to judge.

THE CONDITION FOR SALVATION

Small children don't have the ability to understand that an affirmative response to the Gospel is the condition for salvation. They don't know what they must do to be saved (Acts 16:30-31).

Galatians 5:19-21 gives a long list of the behaviors of those who are in rebellion against God; and Revelation 21:8 has a similar, but shorter list. The point is that you cannot go to heaven if you choose to live this way; you cannot go to heaven in your sin. As Ezekiel 18:20 says, "The soul who sins shall die. . . . And the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself." The problem is, children don't understand this.

John MacArthur has written, "Little children have no record of unbelief or evil works, and therefore there is no basis for their deserving an eternity apart from God They are graciously and sovereignly saved by God as part of the atoning work of Jesus Christ."²

Before a child knows how to choose between good and evil, he or she is protected from judgment for sin by the blood of the Lord. If one cannot reasonably accept or reject the payment for sin made by Christ, that person is accepted by God. "In the Bible, infants, little children and others who cannot believe are neither told to believe or expected to do so."³

Since the condition for salvation is accepting the Gospel, the inability to do so spares one the judgment for not having done so.

THE COMPASSION OF THE SAVIOR

Jesus' love for little children is seen on more than one occasion in the Gospels. Indeed, the references to Jesus' interaction with children also include the adjective "little," as if to highlight His tender compassion toward little ones (Matthew 19:13–14; Mark 10:13–14). In Luke 18:15–17 the reference is to infants, or little babies, who are brought to Him.

Perhaps the most meaningful reference is Matthew 18:14 where Jesus says, "Even so it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish." It could not be more clear from this verse that Jesus is not willing for little ones (Greek *micros*, from which our word "micro" derives) to be lost.

What about children lost through miscarriage or abortions? My wife and I lost our first child five months into the pregnancy by miscarriage, and it was heartbreaking. I believe that this child of ours we've never met has been in heaven for decades and that we'll be united with him or her when we get there. Of our five children, one is already in heaven. I believe the Bible is clear that life and personhood begin at conception. Therefore, any persons conceived but not born are persons nonetheless and are taken to heaven when they die from miscarriage or abortion. All women who have suffered either of these experiences should expect to be reunited with these precious ones in heaven. The same is true for children who, due to mental impairment, never develop fully to the point that they can understand and receive the Gospel.

THE CHILD OF DAVID

In 2 Samuel 12, we find the story of the child of King David that provides compelling evidence for the salvation of children. You may remember David's story—he committed adultery with Bathsheba who became pregnant with David's child. After the child was born, God sent the prophet Nathan to confront David over his sin of adultery and of having Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, killed.

As part of God's judgment upon David, Nathan told him that the child born to Bathsheba would be taken away in death. The child became ill and for a week David fasted and prayed for the child to live. But on the seventh day it died. David then arose, washed and anointed himself and went into the temple to worship the Lord. He then asked for something to eat. His servants were confused. They couldn't understand why David was not fasting and mourning after the child died instead of before. David's reply was, "Now he

is dead; why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me" (verse 23).

In other words, David was confident that he would see his child again. David believed he was going to heaven when he died, and that is where he expected to see his son. Even though the idea of heaven was not as fully understood theologically in the Old Testament as in the New Testament, David still believed that he and his son would be reunited in the place of God's blessing where believers went after death.

David understood then what we now know to be true: Small children and infants go to be with the Lord when they die.

CONCLUSION

There are legitimate questions to be raised, and we'll deal with two of them here: The age of accountability and the age of children in heaven.

What About the Age of Accountability?

People are always looking for a specific age by which to define the age of accountability. But the age at which a child becomes accountable for the message of the Gospel is as different as are children themselves. No two children develop at the same rate and in the same way. They all are on different developmental paths. Children are sinners from the moment of their conception. But they are covered by the blood of Christ that "takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29) until they can understand their sin and resulting guilt before God. Isaiah 7:16 makes reference to a child (actually, the coming Messiah) and his ability "to refuse the evil and choose the good"—so there is a time when a child crosses that line. But the Bible does not give an age at which that happens.

Parents need to be sensitive to their children to discern when their understanding has developed sufficiently to be accountable for what they are learning about Christ, sin, and the Gospel. If children are raised in a Christian home, conversations will happen that let parents know how their children are developing spiritually. Growing up in a pastor's home, I would see people get saved and be baptized in church when I was small, and I would ask my father questions about those experiences at home. Children may commit themselves to Christ at an early age, and do it several more times as they mature. I was actually baptized twice, once after professing my faith as a child and then again as a young adult when I felt I fully understood the implications of the Gospel.

The “moment of accountability” will happen as a child begins to express understanding after hearing a Sunday school lesson or after a conversation with a parent. Each of my four children came to know Christ at different times and in different ways, as I’m sure is true for most parents with their children. The main challenge is for parents to be sensitive. When we have child dedication services in our church, we are really dedicating the parents to the task of staying sensitive to their children and leading them to Christ as soon as they are able to understand their need for the Gospel.

Many parents also wonder about the age for baptism. Children should only be baptized when they can understand and explain the Gospel themselves, when they can express assurance of their own salvation. And the same should be true for participating in the Lord’s Table.

Parents should not be anxious about children who go to be with the Lord. God is just and compassionate and receives little ones to Himself with open arms. Nor should they be anxious about the age of accountability. Prayer and sensitivity to the Lord’s leading will allow you to minister the Gospel to your child at the appropriate time. The main thing is to make sure you are a Christian yourself. You cannot impart what you do not possess.

How Old Will Children Be in Heaven?

Finally, we consider the question of children’s ages in heaven. That is, when a child dies, especially as an infant (and certainly those who never reach full term and are born), will that child be a child in heaven or a mature adult? If an infant dies at too young an age to understand God on earth, how could that child enjoy and appreciate God in heaven as an infant? Some argue that the book of Revelation depicts *everyone* in heaven worshiping God, which suggests that all will be able to do that in terms of age and maturity—that is, as adults.

Alister McGrath suggests this interesting perspective: “As each person reaches their peak of perfection around the age of thirty, they will be resurrected as they would have appeared at that time—even if they had never lived to reach that age . . . The New Jerusalem will thus be populated with men and women as they would appear at the age of 30 . . . but with every blemish removed.”⁴

We know from Isaiah 11:8 that there will be infants and children in the Millennium: “The nursing child shall play by the cobra’s hole, and the weaned child shall put his hand in the viper’s den.” So, if

the Millennium is part of heaven, there's some reason to believe that perhaps children will be in heaven and allowed to grow until they reach maturity at around the age of thirty—then sort of “frozen” in time. (Many of us would love to be frozen in time at around that age, I suspect!)

Another perspective is that of J. Vernon McGee: “I believe with all my heart that God will raise the little ones such that the mother’s arms who have ached for them will have the opportunity of holding them. The father’s hand which never held the little hand will be given the privilege. I believe that little ones will grow up in the care of their earthly parents, if they are saved.”⁵

To summarize, we certainly do not know with certainty about the age of children in heaven. The Bible simply does not say. Whatever God’s answer to this question is, we know it will be a wholly satisfying one to parents who have lost small children whom God has taken to heaven.

A family once lost their infant child. When an older sister asked where her new little baby brother was, the mother said, “He’s gone to be with Jesus.” Later, the older child heard her mother expressing her grief to a friend over having lost her baby. The little girl asked her mother, “Is something lost when you know where it is?” “No, dear,” the mother replied. “Then how can our baby be lost when we know he’s with Jesus?” the wise little girl asked.

A baby is not lost when you know where it is, and babies who die at an early age are with Jesus.

Notes

1. http://www.backtothebible.org/bigquestions/bq_bigquestions.htm.
2. John MacArthur, *Safe in the Arms of God* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2003), 81.
3. Robert Lightner, *Safe in the Arms of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2000), 15–16, 25.
4. Randy Alcorn, *Heaven* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 2004), 289.
5. Quoted by Woodrow Kroll, *Is My Child in Heaven?* (Lincoln: Back to the Bible, 1996).