

Do All Children Go to Heaven?

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Reconciling original sin and death of the innocent.

Jim Denison/ May 22, 2013

The greatest miracle of the Incarnation is not that God visited us—as Creator, he has every right to enter his creation. All through the Hebrew Bible, we find God intervening in the affairs of our planet.

The greatest miracle of the Incarnation is that this Creator chose to come to us as a baby. The One who holds the universe in the palm of his hand (Isa. 40:12) reduced his omnipotence into a miniscule fetus and was born as a helpless baby. Hands that held the universe were sheltered in a mother's arms. Christmas shows us what God thinks of babies.

As I write, our nation is grieving the horrific deaths of 10 children in a freak storm in Oklahoma. Seven were pulled from the wreckage of an elementary school. Watching the news coverage of the tornado, many of us are asking faith's hardest questions: Why did God allow such a tragedy? Why didn't he prevent it, or at least shelter these innocent, helpless children? What do we do now?

And the question we'll address here: What happened to the children when they died?

In my 35 years of ministry, I have stood beside parents as they gave doctors permission to withdraw life support from their babies. I have stood beside tiny coffins as parents placed their children's bodies in the ground. I am the father of two grown sons; every day since they were born, I have prayed for God to keep them safe.

When a child dies, part of us dies as well. And we ask: What happens to them? Assuming they were not old enough to understand the gospel and trust Christ as Lord and Savior, what is their eternal state now?

What does God think of children?

One day Jesus' disciples asked him, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" (Matt. 18:1). They assumed that Jesus would pick one of them—perhaps Peter, his lead apostle, or John. His answer must have shocked them:

He called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." (Matt. 18:2-4).

A little later, "little children were brought to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them" (Matt. 19:13). This was a typical practice of the day, something like baby dedication days in Baptist churches. When the disciples rebuked the parents who brought children, Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these" (Matt. 19:14). He placed his hands on them—hands that healed lepers and raised the dead, hands that formed each of us (Col. 1:16) and bore the nails of our sin, were laid on these infants in an act of divine acceptance and blessing.

The most normative picture of our relationship with God is that of children with their father. Jesus taught us to pray to "our Father in heaven" (Matt. 6:9). He told us that we have "one Father, and he is in heaven" (Matt. 23:10). As a result, Christians are his children: "To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God" (John 1:12).

What does God think of children? Jesus called them "greatest in the kingdom of heaven." Scripture describes Christians as the "children" of God. Could our Lord pay any higher compliments to children?

What, then, happens to them when they die? We'll consider three common answers, then conclude with my approach to this difficult issue.

Option 1: Unbaptized children go to "limbo" or hell.

If children are part of the "kingdom of heaven," why does the Bible teach that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23), children apparently included? David confessed, "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me" (Ps. 51:5). How can children be "sinful"? And how does the question impact their eternal state?

"Original sin" has been defined as "the dimension of sin with which we begin life, or the effect which the sin of Adam has upon us as a precondition of our lives." The key text is Romans 5:12: "Sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned." The sin of the "original" man, Adam, has somehow been transmitted to "all men." Why? How?

Augustine: Infants are sinners

Prior to St. Augustine (354-430), Christian theologians apparently gave little attention to this question. For Augustine, Romans 5:12 is definitive. In *City of God*, he states that "even the infants, not personally in their own life, but according to the common origin of the human race, have all broken God's covenant in that one in whom all have sinned."

Psalm 119:119 warns, "all the wicked of the earth you discard like dross." The "law brings wrath" (Rom. 4:15) upon all of humanity, infants included. As a result, according to Augustine, "even the infants are, according to the true belief, born in sin, not actual but original, so that we confess they have need of grace for the remission of sins." This doctrine is essential to God's fairness in condemning infants along with the rest of humanity: "The soul of the infant, being guilty of no sin of neglect against itself, would perish unjustly, unless original sin rendered it obnoxious to punishment."

Theologian Stanley Grenz summarizes Augustine's very influential position in his [book](#) *Theology for the Community of God*:

Original sin is the punishment we all bear for Adam's sin. This punishment is ours in that we participated in that first sin, for we were all potentially present in Adam when he transgressed the divine prohibition. This blight is perpetuated through procreation and results in condemnation. Simply stated, all were potentially in Adam, all sinned in Adam, all inherit the punishment for Adam's sin, and thereby all are condemned.

According to Augustine, the "carnal excitement" that accompanies procreation causes the child to be tainted with the sin of its parents, who were tainted by the sin of their parents, and so on back to Adam. He viewed infant baptism as essential for washing away this inherited sin. Later Catholic theologians such as St. Thomas Aquinas believed that an unbaptized child, if it died, would spend eternity in [limbo](#). This is an "eternal state of natural joy," but not the greater joy of Heaven.

By contrast, followers of the theologian Pelagius (390-418) believed that humans are not tainted by the sin of Adam and are free to fulfill God's word and will. Pelagius was declared a heretic by the Council of Carthage in 418. The "semi-Pelagian" position teaches that humans inherit a propensity to sin from Adam, but are nonetheless able to choose against sin.

If Augustine's position is correct, unbaptized children who died in the tornado went to hell as condemned sinners. Why, then, does the Bible nowhere command us to baptize children? While circumcision was required for infant boys in the Old Testament (Gen. 17:12), there is no similar requirement for the baptism of infants in the New. In a day when infant mortality rates were high, we would expect Scripture to mandate this act if it is essential to a child's salvation.

To the contrary, there is not a single clear example of a child being baptized in the New Testament (Lydia's "members of her household" and the Philippian jailer's "family" come closest, though their ages are not specified; Acts 16:15, 33). Nor do we find a single biblical command that we baptize infants.

Calvin: Non-elect infants are condemned

In his Institutes of the Christian Religion, John Calvin defined original sin as:

a hereditary depravity and corruption of our nature, diffused into all parts of the soul, which first makes us liable to God's wrath, then also brings forth in us those works which Scripture calls "works of the flesh" (Gal. 5:19). And that is properly what Paul often calls sin.

Calvin argued strongly for Augustine's position. Citing Romans 8:20, he said, "the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected." He believed that all people inherit Adam's sin and punishment, "since, therefore, the curse, which goes about through all the regions of the world, flowed hither and yon from Adam's guilt, it is not unreasonable if it spread to all his offspring." As a result, Adam "entangled and immersed his offspring in the same miseries" that he experienced.

Calvin agreed with Augustine that "we bear inborn defect from our mother's womb." Referencing Psalm 51:5, he claimed, "From his very conception [David] carries the confession of his own perversity. Since it is clear that this was not peculiar to David, it follows that the common lot of mankind is exemplified in him."¹³ He concludes: "All of us, who have descended from impure seed, are born infected with the contagion of sin. In fact, before we saw the light of this life we were soiled and spotted in God's sight."

However, Calvin disagreed with Augustine regarding the method of this transmission: "Instead of saying . . . that each of us draws vice and corruption from his parents, it would be more correct to say that we are all alike corrupted in Adam alone, because immediately after his revolt God took away from human nature what He had bestowed upon it."

Advocates of the Augustine/Calvin position cite Ephesians 2:3, which calls humanity "objects of wrath." This description would mean that we are all condemned, whatever our age or status relative to saving faith. However, if "objects of wrath" is translated "wrathful people," the phrase has no bearing on our question.

Calvin clearly broke with Augustine, however, with regard to election for infants. In the Reformer's mind, election takes precedence over inherited guilt. If a baby was part of the elect, he or she would be in heaven. If not, "we may rest assured that God would never have suffered any infants to be slain except those who were already damned and predestined for eternal death," as "there are babies a span long in hell."

Some Calvinists today believe that non-elect babies are in hell. Others believe that "covenant children" receive particular favor from God. Still others, such as Charles Spurgeon and Al Mohler, believe that all babies who die are in heaven.

Option 2: God judges children by "the light they had"

Paul said of the Gentiles, "the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them" (Rom. 2:15). God has revealed himself not

only to our hearts, but also in our world: "Since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse" (Rom. 1:20).

It seems logical to extend these assertions to children. They have God's law "written on their hearts" and can see his "invisible qualities" in their world. If they die before hearing (or being able to understand) the gospel, God would then judge them according to their response to what they do know of his word and will. In other words, he judges them by their character and conduct.

This same logic can be extended to the so-called "ignorant," the billions who have never heard the gospel. In this view, God judges them by their response to his law on their hearts and revelation in his creation.

However, Scripture teaches that "it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Eph. 2:8-9). Works do not save us, whether they are done before or after we have received the gospel.

In addition, this option would seem to mitigate against evangelism and missions, since children and the "ignorant" could be "saved" through their works. If that is so, missions become unnecessary, and the sacrifices made by missionaries are wasted. In addition, sharing the gospel with obedient children and the "ignorant" risks their salvation since they might reject it and be condemned.

Option 3: God judges them by what they would have done

God is omniscient, knowing all things and all hearts (Acts 15:8). He knew that Abraham would become a "great nation" (Gen. 12:2) and that Pharaoh would reject his word (Ex. 7:4). Jesus knew that Judas would betray him (John 13:26) and that the other disciples would abandon him (Matt. 26:31).

If he knows our future actions, presumably he knows what children who die would have done had they lived. Specifically, he would know whether they would accept or reject his offer of salvation through Christ. If they die before receiving that offer, he would then judge them according to what they would have done if they had lived.

As with the second option, this same logic can be applied to the "ignorant," the billions who have never heard the gospel. However, evangelism and missions become even less relevant since no one needs to hear the gospel in order to be "saved" by its truth.

Option 4: Children who die are with God

My belief is that children who die before they are able to understand and respond to the gospel are with God in heaven. The following assertions have led me to this position.

God judges us for our own sins

God told Jeremiah, "I the Lord search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve" (Jer. 17:10, quoted by Paul in Rom. 2:6). The Apostle warned that "for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil" (Rom. 2:8-9).

Paul seems clearly to assign judgment to actions:

All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous (Rom. 7:12-13).

Ezekiel 18:20 also states, "The soul who sins is the one who will die." According to Scripture, we are not condemned for the sins of others (including those of Adam), but only for the sins we commit personally.

We are in God's "book of life" from conception

The Lord keeps a "book of life" in which are written the names of those who will be with him in heaven. Moses said to God: "Please forgive their sin—but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written." The Lord replied, "Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book" (Ex. 32:32, 33).

God has written your name in this book, and must "blot it out" if you choose to reject his free salvation in Christ. If you die without Christ, God is forced to remove your name from his book of life and you'll be "thrown into the lake of fire" (Rev. 20:15). Scripture is clear: "Nothing impure will ever enter [heaven], nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life" (Rev. 21:27).

Conversely, Jesus said to his disciples, "Rejoice that your names are written in heaven" (Luke 10:20). Paul addressed the Philippian Christians as "my fellow laborers, whose names are in the book of life" (Phil. 4:3).

In other words, at the moment of our conception our names are written in God's "book of life" and are removed only when we sin against him.

God judges us by our choices

But what of Romans 5:18-19? This text states: "Just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous."

Is it not clear that Adam's trespass has condemned us all, that his disobedience has made us all sinners? No, actually. It's not.

Each verse is separated by a comma; if the first phrase applies to everyone, so must the second. If Adam's trespass condemns us all, Jesus' "act of righteousness" must save us all. If Adam's disobedience makes us all sinners, Jesus' obedience must make us all righteous. In other words, universal guilt must mean universal salvation.

The same logic applies to Romans 3:23, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." This statement should be read in its context:

But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus (Rom. 3:21-24).

Just as "all have sinned," all "are justified freely by his grace." If the first is universally true, the second must be as well. Once again, on the basis of this text, universal guilt means universal salvation.

However, universalism is clearly rejected in Scripture: "If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire" (Rev. 20:15). If we are not to apply the second phrases universally, we are not to apply the first phrases universally, either.

Here's the key: In both cases, a choice is required. The "righteousness of God comes through faith in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 3:22). This conferred "righteousness" is the "justification that brings life for all men" (Rom. 5:18) and comes to those who choose it. By the same token, "condemnation for all men" (Rom. 5:18) comes to those who choose it. If justification requires a decision on our part, so must condemnation.

The key is our response to the gospel

The key to "justification that brings life for all men" (Rom. 5:18) is our decision to receive such grace through faith (Eph. 2:8-9). The key to the "trespass" that leads to "condemnation for all men" is therefore our decision to reject such grace. This decision is the "unpardonable sin" (Mark 3:28-29) because it rejects God's pardon through Christ.

If children have not reached the maturity by which they can make this decision, they have not broken their relationship with God. Their names are in God's "book of life," and will be blotted out only if they sin against him (Ex. 32:33).

But what constitutes such sin?

Some point to moral decisions as the basis for a child's salvation. In *Christian Theology*, Millard Erickson writes:

If a child dies before he or she is capable of making genuine moral decisions, there is only innocence, and the child will experience the same type of future existence with the Lord as will those who have reached the age of moral responsibility and had their sins forgiven as a result of accepting the offer of salvation based upon Christ's atoning death.

I agree that such a child will be in heaven. However, I disagree that sin is the best defined as the capacity to make "genuine moral decisions."

David, repenting of his immorality with Bathsheba, said to God, "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight" (Psalm 51:4). Sin is vertical before it is horizontal; it is rejecting God's word and will above all else.

Ironically, Erickson agrees. "The essence of sin is simply failure to let God be God. It is placing something else, anything else, in the supreme place which is his," he writes. "This contention is supported by major texts in both the Old and New Testaments.... Proper recognition of God is primary. Idolatry in any form, not pride, is the essence of sin."

According to Jesus, the "first and greatest commandment" is to "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matt. 22:37-38). Sin is more than the refusal to make "genuine moral decisions"—it is the refusal to love, worship, and obey God.

Until children reach the maturity that enables them to love, worship, and obey God in Christ, they have not "sinned." While "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23), they have not earned such "wages." If they die in this state, they are with God in heaven. This unbroken relationship with the Lord makes them "greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 18:4), so that "the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these" (Matt. 19:14).

"No condemnation"

In the end, Erickson expresses well my position:

We all were involved in Adam's sin, and thus receive both the corrupted nature that was his after the fall, and the guilt and condemnation that attach to his sin. With this matter of guilt, however, just as with the imputation of Christ's righteousness, there must be some conscious and voluntary decision on our part. Until this is the case, there is only a conditional imputation of guilt. Thus, there is no condemnation until one reaches the age of responsibility.

David said of his deceased newborn son, "I shall go to him, but he will not return to me" (2 Sam. 12:23). He believed that his child was with the Lord, and that he would join him one day in heaven (Ps. 23:6). I would offer the same assurance to every believer who suffers the death of a child. Your child belonged to his or her Father and is now with him in eternal paradise.

One of the hardest days of my life was spent beside a couple in a neonatal ICU unit as they had to decide whether or not to continue life support for their 18-day-old daughter. As they agonized, they happened to look up at the tiny window in the room. They watched as a red helium balloon floated past that window and up into the sky. They sensed God's assurance that if they released their little girl, she would be in heaven with her Lord.

And so they did. And so she is.

This post originally appeared on [the Denison Forum](#).

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