

The Destiny of Those Who Die in Infancy



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Introduction

In this paper an attempt will be made to show what the Bible teaches about the destiny of those who die in infancy. In order to accomplish this purpose, the major views on this subject will be presented followed by an examination of the biblical material.

The Major Views

Infants who die in infancy unbaptized do not go to heaven: In Roman Catholic theology there is no official dogma on the destiny of dead unbaptized infants. Nevertheless, the weight of tradition teaches that they go to a place called limbo, which is neither heaven nor hell, a place of natural happiness but without full communion with God. Cf. *Limbo: Unsettled Question* by George J. Dyer (NY: Sheed & Ward, 1964) or *Encyclopedia of Theology*, edited by Karl Rahner (NY: The Seabury Press, 1975), pp. 850–851.

Infants who die in infancy unbaptized may or may not go to heaven: Although there is no official Lutheran view concerning the fate of dead unbaptized infants, the following information is relevant: (1) infants are born in original sin; (2) faith is absolutely necessary for salvation; (3) infants are capable of saving faith; and (4) faith can be created by (a) the gospel, (b) water baptism (c) the Lord's Supper. Cf. *The Book of Concord*, translated & edited by Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), pp. 29, 33, 178, 442–446. Nevertheless, the 17th century Lutheran theologian, John Gerhard said in his *Loci Theologici*, IX: 282, "...yet, meanwhile, that, in the case of

deprivation or of impossibility, the children of Christians may be saved through an extraordinary and peculiar divine dispensation. ... We neither can, nor ought to, rashly condemn those infants that die either in their mother's womb, or suddenly for any cause before receiving Baptism; we should rather conclude that the prayers of godly parents, or, if the parents in this matter are neglectful, the prayers of the Church, poured out before God for these infants, are mercifully heard, and that they are received into favor and life by God." quoted in English translation in Heinrich Schmid's *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), p. 554. Some Fundamentalists also teach that Scripture does not answer this question and thus they have no hope to offer parents who have lost a new-born baby.

Infants who die in infancy are damned: Some Calvinists have taught this view while other Calvinists emphatically reject it.

Infants who die in infancy are saved and with Christ in heaven: This was, by far, the majority view among Fundamentalist writers. One of the best treatments of this subject from this perspective is a book entitled *Heaven for Those Who Can't Believe* by Robert P. Lightner (Schaumburg, Illinois: Regular Baptist Press, 1977).

The Major Reasons for Believing that Infants Who Die in Infancy Go to Heaven

The Death and Resurrection of Christ: While some have tried to argue that infants are morally neutral or even holy, the Bible teaches that death is the penalty for Adam's sin (Romans 5:12, 15, 17) and that death passes upon all mankind, including infants. Thus, infants are considered sinful. Apart from the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, no one, not even infants, would be worthy to enter heaven. The foremost reason why infants who die in infancy go to heaven is because Jesus died for their sin (John 3:16–18).

The Nature and Place of Saving Faith: Saving faith is not a good work; it is simply trusting in Christ's death and resurrection for salvation (John 3:14, 15). In a very real sense, faith does not save us; it merely attaches itself to Christ's death and resurrection which save us.

God's Special Interest in Infants & Young Children: Matthew 18:1–14 refers to both those who are little children physically and those who, like these little children, have trust in Christ. These are greatest in God's kingdom; these have angels who have direct access to God; these are the objects of God the Father's care. Mark 10:13–16 refers to Jesus blessing the children; again, it reveals the special love God the Son has for little children.

David's Statement Upon the Death of His Week Old Child: While his new born son was still alive, David fasted and prayed. When he discovered the seven day old child had died, he washed his face and ate a meal. When his servants express amazement at his lack of grief, he tells them, "While the child was yet alive, I fasted and wept: for I said, Who can tell whether God will be gracious to me, that the child may live? But now he is dead, wherefore should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me" (2 Samuel 12:22, 23). David's comment cannot refer only to his awareness that someday, he, too, would join his child in death, because when his adult son, Absalom, died, David's response was radically different. He did not speak of going to him (cf. 2 Samuel 18:33) but cried out in great anguish.

The Nature of the Great White Throne Judgment: All of the lost of all ages will someday stand before God's great white Throne to be judged. Revelation 20:12–13 clearly teach that a vital part of this judgment involves the personal works of these people. Yet infants who die in infancy have no personal works. This gives us reason to believe that they are not present at this judgment and, thus, are not considered lost but part of the redeemed.

Hell, the Punishment for Refusal to Believe: Condemnation is not merely overlooking the Savior but a stubborn refusal to believe (John 3:18–21). This fact is supported by the use of two different Greek words in John 3:36 (both translated “believe” in KJV). The first word, “He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life,” is the usual word for believe and is also found in verses 16 & 18. The second word, however, “he that believeth not the Son shall not see life” is different and means “to disobey”. Since infants who die in infancy are not capable of this stubborn refusal to believe, they do not come under this condemnation.

Divine Election: Under normal circumstances the benefits of salvation provided by Christ’s death and resurrection are applied to those who believe and trust in Christ alone for salvation. When the Philippian jailor asked Paul, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” he was told, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved” (Acts 16:30, 31). At the same time, those who believe in Christ are called, “elect” (1 Thessalonians 1:4, 5; Colossians 3:12). Both faith and election are mechanisms by which the benefits of Christ can be (and under normal circumstance, would be) applied to individuals. However, if infants are not capable of saving faith, election alone becomes the mechanism by which people are “chosen to salvation” (2 Thessalonians 2:13). The very fact of dying in infancy is outward proof that one is elect, chosen by God to live with Him in heaven. R. A. Webb, in his book, *The Theology of Infant Salvation*, argues for this view. So does Charles Spurgeon, in *The New Park Street and Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*.

One Purpose For Hell: to Display God’s Righteousness: If the lost are placed in the lake of fire because their names are not found written in the book of life (Revelation 20:15), the opening of other books and judging them according to their works (Revelation 20:12, 13) must have another purpose, namely to display God’s righteousness. This is accomplished in two ways: (1) if there are degrees of punishment in the lake of fire, God’s righteous justice is evidenced by judging the lost according to their works. As stated earlier in this article, infants who have died in infancy would not have any works for which to be judged. (2) Furthermore, if God’s righteousness is to be demonstrated by judging the lost according to their works, they must possess both memory and conscience to understand that they deserve this punishment. Infants who have died in infancy would have neither memory nor conscience of evil works. All of these reasons support the belief that infants dying in infancy go to heaven but the primary basis for so believing is that Jesus died and rose again for their salvation.