

Do Infants Go To Heaven When They Die?

The Q and A Series
Pastor Joshua Fetterhoff
May, 2010

Notes

- The following paper may also be applied to those who die having never had the ability to make cognitive decisions no matter their age (i.e. an adult with cerebral palsy).
- The author asks that all statements be taken in the context of the entire paper since pulling something from the whole may bring about conclusions not promoted by the author.

Introduction

This question has always been challenging to answer especially for pastors who deal with parents wondering about the eternal destiny of their child. The answer, “The Bible doesn’t really say.” comes across as trite and inadequate, although it is true to a certain degree. I have been asked this question and I feel I owe it to God’s people to seek to give an answer.

After much prayer and study, I have come to the following conclusion. It is my personal conviction that 1. I cannot dogmatically give an answer as this would be forcing my thoughts and opinions upon God. 2. I have found in Scripture several passages and principles that seem to point to God’s grace being shown to the mentally incapable. 3. I am to minister to families that are dealing with a death of this nature with compassion and assuring them that God always does what is right and just.

The above statements are not specific by design. As a pastor, I carry much responsibility before God for the things that I teach and preach. In a matter such as this, I want to be totally confident that what I am stating is of God and has firm Biblical support. If it does not, then I must not promote it as Biblical truth. Although this does not satisfy my curiosity nor the families in grief, I must be able to say that I have been completely faithful to my God and His Word. It is with this that I state that my opinion is that God’s Word does leave room for the possibility that God shows grace to those who die without ever having the mental capability to believe.

To all readers of this document, it is my sincere desire that you carefully take time to understand the scriptures for yourself. Do not allow yourself to force things upon the Bible but rather allow the Bible to force things upon you. This was the challenge I faced and why it has taken me four weeks to put this document together. It is with this posture that I share with you my research.

Biblical Basis

Total Depravity of All

To begin, I feel it imperative that I clearly state that I firmly believe in the total depravity of man. The scriptures are too clear to allow for anything other than the belief that all persons, no matter their mental capability are born with a sin nature. No man, woman, or child can be considered innocent before God. We all have the natural propensity to sin.

Romans 5:12 *Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned.*

The apostle Paul states very clearly that sin is passed down from the father to the child beginning with Adam. This has resulted in a sin-cursed humanity. All mankind is cursed by a sin nature which manifests itself in acts done in rebellion to God. See also Psalm 14:1; Psalm 51:5; Jeremiah 17:9; Romans 3:10-28; Ephesians 2:1-3.

The Character of God

In any matter where a subject is discussed that is not expressly declared in Scriptures, it is imperative to look at the character of God. A study of God’s character helps us to understand how He deals with things that might not always be clearly stated. Please notice the following passages:

1 Timothy 2:3-4 *For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour; 4 Who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth.*

2 Peter 3:9 *The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.*

Matthew 18:14 *Even so it is not the will of your Father which is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish.*

Ezekiel 33:11 *Say unto them, As I live, saith the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?*

In looking at these passages and others, God does not delight in the eternal death of people. In fact, it seems as if His desire is that all come to Him for salvation. If the scriptures say such things about the heart of God, is it not possible that He also looks upon those who have never had the mental ability to know Him with grace. Notice also Psalm 86:15 *“But thou, O Lord, art a God full of compassion, and gracious, longsuffering, and plenteous in mercy and truth.”* I believe it is just for me to state that, based upon the character and attributes of God, He is certainly capable to deliver those who have no mental capability to believe or reject Christ.

God is a just God.

To say that God is just means that He always does things that are right. In Hebrew, the word translated “just” is used for weights and measures. A “just” weight is one that is the correct weight. It will always convey the correct amount.

Deuteronomy 32 records for us a song written by Moses to the people of Israel. Verse four states *“He is the Rock, his work is perfect: for all his ways are judgment: a God of truth and without iniquity, just and right is he.”* This character quality of God was certainly known to the Israelites. The Levites in Nehemiah’s day speak of the justice of God in their prayer to Him rehearsing all their history. They were very familiar with how God blessed obedience and cursed disobedience. Nehemiah 9:33 says, *“Howbeit thou art just in all that is brought upon us; for thou hast done right, but we have done wickedly:”*. Another example of the justice of God is found in God’s judgment of the Israelites in the wilderness. You will notice in Numbers 14 how God showed His justice. He deemed it right that those over twenty were the one’s responsible for all the disobedience. It is these He decreed would never see the promised land while the younger generation was “delivered”.

Genesis 18:25 states *“That be far from thee to do after this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked: and that the righteous should be as the wicked, that be far from thee: Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?”* This falls in the context of Abraham’s discussion with the Angel of the LORD concerning the judgment of Sodom. Later in the passage, we see the LORD’s judgment would be stopped if there was only ten righteous (vs. 32). We can be confident according to the nature of God and His character, that He will always do what is right (just, correct judgment). See also Isaiah 45:21, John 5:30, and Revelation 15:3 for further support of God being just and right in all His ways.

God is a gracious God.

To say that God is gracious is to say that He has displayed His favor upon people throughout history who did not deserve it at all. This attribute of God is imperative to Gospel. The Gospel displays and defines the grace and love of God. Ephesians 2:8-9 says it so clearly, *“For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: 9 Not of works, lest any man should boast.”* As I have already stated, no one is born in innocence before God. With this being true, the “salvation” of anyone who dies must be solely based upon the grace of God for it to even be possible.

Is it not true that Jesus’ death on the cross satisfied God’s wrath against sin? 1 John 2:1-2 states *“My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.”* Jesus’ death satisfied God’s wrath against the sins of the whole world

but not all believe this to be true. Romans 5:8-10 clarify, *“But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him. For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life.”* Since the sins have been paid for by Jesus, than God’s grace would seem to be broad enough to “save” those who never understood the concept of their sinfulness.

God has a love for Children

Matthew 18:1-6, 10 and Matthew 19:13-15 show us Jesus’ great care for children. Why has God given us this glimpse into Christ’s compassionate heart? Primarily to illustrate to the disciples God’s standard of “greatness” but also to show that children are important to God. I believe that God wants us to know that He values children just as He values adults. These passages do not answer the question but they do show us God’s heart toward children.

The Example of King David

Many turn to 2 Samuel 12:15-23 for substantiation of hope in seeing an infant child again in heaven. 2 Samuel 12:23 records David saying *“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.”* David had been fasting and mourning while the child was alive hoping that he would be spared. But when the child died, David washed himself and worshipped God because he knew God had taken his child and that he would one day be with his child again. David’s response to this son’s death stands in stark contrast to the death of his adult son Absalom. Could the difference be because David was unsure of Absalom’s eternal destiny (2 Samuel 18:33)?

We can draw the following conclusions from this account: 1. David has confidence in seeing his infant son again and it must be a decent place for he ceases from mourning. 2. David seems to be a believer in God and thus will be in heaven which can lead to the thinking that this will be the place of this reunion. 3. The only other interpretation of this verse is that David is speaking of the grave but this loses value when one looks at his response to the death. He returns to normal life rather than mourning as was the typical practice. This passage seems to infer that, in this instance, David and his infant son will be united again in heaven.

Salvation and Condemnation

God sent Jesus into the world to save the world, not to condemn it. He didn’t need to condemn it because it is condemned already by it’s propensity to sin and the actual manifestation of that sinful nature (John 3:17-21).

This condemnation is taken away when a person believes in Jesus to be their Savior (John 3:18a; Romans 8:1). So according to this, salvation involves the cognitive ability to make a decision. It involves believing in Jesus.

But death happens to all men, even those who have no cognitive ability to make decisions for themselves. Is there salvation for them or are they left to eternal damnation without ever having a chance to believe? This seems to go against God’s character of justice and grace.

In order to fully answer this question, I must explain what the Bible states as the source of eternal condemnation. Let’s turn our attention to John 3:16-18 *“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. 17 For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. 18 He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.”* Please notice in this passage how an emphasis is placed upon a cognitive belief for everlasting life or the opposite, a knowing rejection of Christ. It is this rejection of Christ that brings about condemnation. An infant cannot knowingly reject Christ because they cannot knowingly reject anything. Their mental ability is immature and is not yet able to make choices concerning spiritual matters. If this lack of belief is what brings about condemnation, then it would seem plausible that a person who has never had the ability to believe or not believe must not be condemned by

God. With this in mind, I propose that they may be accepted under the grace and justice of God. Notice also Jesus' words in John 12:48 "He that rejecteth me, and receiveth not my words, hath one that judgeth him: the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day." The verbs "rejecteth" and "receiveth" are all things which an infant would be incapable of doing.

Clarification from Romans 1

It is important to note that God requires salvation out of all people who have the capacity to believe even those who are in far off lands who have never seen a Bible. This seems unfair yet God has placed them in a beautiful world that declares His glory (Psalm 19:1). Romans 1:18-20 state "*For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness; 19 Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them. 20 For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse:*" This passage speaks of one aspect of God's revelation to mankind. This is commonly called God's "general revelation". God's creation is testimony of His existence and who He is. This passage very clearly says that all those things of creation that are known to man are enough to make man responsible for their sin. It says "they are without excuse". I see this passage referring to those who most definitely have the mental capability to understand and make decisions. Notice the following:

"who hold the truth in unrighteousness" (vs. 18) – This participle literally means "to restrain or hold back". So we see these men holding back or restraining the truth by their unrighteous lives. These men are playing an active role and thus are worthy of God's wrath. See 2 Thessalonians 2:6-7 for an example of the use of this active participle.

"known of God" (vs. 19)– This is an adjective that can be otherwise translated, "the knowable things of God". This is a word that speaks of knowing something by experience more than just mere factual knowledge. This reveals the context to be men who have the ability to know experientially the things of God.

"being understood by the things that are made" (20) – This verb comes from the very root word for "mind". It could be translated, "to perceive with the mind". A very distinct word pointing to the active use of one's mind.

I could go on down through this passage but it is not necessary. As you can see, it certainly leaves room for the possibility that those who do not have the ability to know or understand God to have an excuse before God although it does not specifically say this.

It is at this point that I ask some deep questions. Could it be that God has allowed infants to die and people to be born with no ability to make personal decisions to teach us more about Himself? What is it that we learn from these dear ones? We learn that we are helpless to help them understand God in a personal way while their minds are yet immature. We learn that they have wonderful qualities that fill us with joy and love. We learn that their best caretaker is God Himself. We learn that since they also are people, they are valuable in God's sight.

Conclusion

Based upon the above Scriptures and Biblical Principles, I believe it is right for me to minister from the posture that God is a just and gracious God who will always do what is right. And the comforting thing is that this is not based upon our standard of "rightness" but upon God's. Let us not forget that He knows us better than we know ourselves. He may have chosen to be unspecific on such an issue because He knew what we as humans might do with such information. We know God values life and hates murder. We know He gives life and He allows lives to end. Should we not honor God's silence on this issue as His purposeful will and focus rather on what we know to be true about Him?

I cannot dogmatically say that God saves infants if they die but it is my personal opinion that the Scriptures certainly allow for this possibility. As a pastor, I believe it is my duty to those under my

shepherding that I seek to Biblically answer this question. It is my conviction that I not preach nor teach things that do not clearly come from the firm foundation of the Scriptures.

It is my sincere longing that we all take great comfort in the fact that we know God to be just and gracious yet completely holy. He will do what is right concerning our loved ones.

I plead with you, the reader, to search these things out for yourself allowing God to guide you.

Notes

The question of the age of accountability often arises during such a discussion. This is a fruitless quest for the only person who truly knows when accountability begins is the individual themselves. Salvation is a result of believing by faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. No one but God and the person can be the judge of when this becomes possible.

All scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version.