

[What happens to infants who die? The need for an answer](#)

Posted: 24 Jul 2012 01:51 AM PDT

My wife and I were camping when we got a phone call that a friend's infant child was in a hospital nearby, and was not likely to live. We came out of the mountains and rushed to the hospital, where we ran into John and Pat MacArthur. They had driven the 200 miles because the child's grandparents were part of our church in Los Angeles.

Entering the NICU, we found the child on life support, and the doctors were not optimistic. Pastor John called the family around him, and he opened his Bible. In that setting, John gave a devotional about what happens to infants who die. As he talked, it was obvious that the family was being comforted by the truths of Scripture. But in the background, something unusual was happening.

Nurses had gathered, and some had gone and alerted others. Soon a dozen or so of the nurses and doctors on the floor had huddled around the entrance to the baby's room, all of them leaning in, trying to listen to Pastor John's devotional. Afterwards I talked to a group of them, and they were stunned. Most of them had worked in the NICU for nearly a decade, and they told me they had never heard a biblical explanation for what happens to babies who die. These workers saw this kind of death on a semi-regular basis, but they just assumed the Bible was silent on the eternal fate of these little ones.

John gave them copies of [Safe in the Arms of God](#), a book he wrote to encourage parents who find themselves in this almost unbearable trial. Reading that book impacted me deeply. I have never gone through that kind of trial, but my mind flashed to a time years earlier, before seminary. A friend who had lost his child asked me what the Bible said about his fate. I was on my way to seminary, and he went to a church where he didn't know any of the pastors. So for some reason, he turned to me.

I squandered the opportunity to give him hope in the Lord. I equivocated, and talked about sin nature, the secret things of the Lord, and how God would be glorified if the child was in heaven or hell. I used the mystery of election to muddle a truth that is also mysterious, but also well attested to; namely that infants who die will go to heaven. I remember the look on my friend's face. Far from being comforted, my words to him left him confused. It was probably the low point of my pastoral counselling.

Every pastor will have to answer the question, "What happens to infants who die?" Sadly, many pastors respond with varying degrees of ambiguity. By relegating it to an area that the Scripture is unclear about, pastors dispense doubt and cause anguish rather than comfort and solace. This forced ambiguity actually causes people to question the character of God, and in many cases leads grieving parents to question God's care for them.

This is sad because the Bible is clear about the fate of infants who die. When I say "clear" I don't mean that there is one particular verse that says "infants go to heaven" (well, I think there are a few, but that is for tomorrow). By "clear" I mean that a compelling systematic case can be developed through Scripture that should give even a novice theologian confidence in addressing this issue.

We will look at that case over the next two days. Tomorrow we will look at what the OT teaches about the issue, and Thursday we will look at what the NT has to say. If you want to help steer this conversation, let me know if there are particular verses you want me to deal with, or any questions in particular you want me to answer. Come back tomorrow and we will start our look at 26 verses in the Bible that teach that infants who die are safe in the arms of God.

There is a tendency to think that the Bible is silent about the issue of what happens to infants who die. However, there are at least 26 different passages that address this issue. In all of them, the implication is that infants who die are returned to the Lord.

Yesterday I talked about the need for confidence in dealing with this issue. So as you go through this list, don't get caught up on one or two particular ones if you disagree. Simply skip those, and let the weight of the others give you confidence. Today we will look at the OT, and tomorrow the NT:

1) Infants belong to God in a special and particular way. In Ezekiel, God describes the slaughter of children born into pagan families as a slaughter of “my children” (Ezek 16:21). This expression of ownership by God over children born into idol worshiping families is stark, and implies God's care for those children in a personal way.

2) God describes children as “having no knowledge of good and evil” (Deut 1:39). They have a sin nature, but they sin in the way that gravity works: they are pulled down. They do not sin in the way that adults do: adults love sin. Children default to sin, while adults run there.

3) God refers to Gentile children as unable to discern the difference between right and wrong (Jonah 4:11). Children are born with a sin nature, and even babies love to sin. But they do so without appreciating why they are doing it. Adults sin because they discern what truth is, and have a disdain for it. Infants sin because they are unable to discern. There is a difference.

4) God refers to children in pagan families who are murdered as “innocents” (Jer 19:4). Obviously this does not mean that they were born without a sin nature, but simply that they had a certain degree of moral innocence. God does not throw around the term “innocent” loosely (nor does he send “innocent” people to hell).

5) God regards infants as victims of the fallen world. This is the example in Ezek 16:4, which is clearly an allegory, but an allegory that only makes sense if children are innocent victims.

6) When God punished the entire nation of Israel for their disobedience in the wilderness, he only took the lives of those who were of fighting age or older (Deut 1:39). This shows that the culpability of those under fighting age is different than the adults, and that accordingly they should not be punished as adults are. If they didn't deserve to die in the wilderness, they certainly didn't deserve to go to hell.

7) Babies will not be punished in hell for the sins of their parents—even of Adam. Deuteronomy 24:16 explains that God will not punish children for what their parents did. That does not mean that there are no consequences for sin—a parent who lives a sin filled life will reap the consequences of that life, and one of those consequences is that the children will be raised apart from the knowledge of God. But that is the consequence of sin, and is manifestly different than God judicially punishing someone for sins they did not commit. The consequence of Adam's sin is that we all are born with a sin nature, but not that God will send us all to hell irrespective of our own actions (more on this one tomorrow when we look at NT judgment passages).

8) This same truth is repeated in Ezekiel 18:20. There, God expressly says that while death is the consequence of a sin nature, God does not execute a second death a person because of his parent's sin.

9) When God's prophet told King Jeroboam that his entire family line would be killed, he expanded on this category distinction. He said that all of Jeroboam's relatives would be punished by a humiliating burial (or lack thereof), but that there was an exception for Jeroboam's infant son. He would be buried, and people would mourn, “because in him there is found something good toward Yahweh, God of Israel” (1 Kings 14:13). It is not that the infant was crawling around

chewing down the high places, but rather that his sin was by his nature, not by his willful rebellion. He was an “innocent” infant, to borrow Jeremiah’s language, and so he will still die, but will be spared the judicial punishment reserved for those who willingly revolted against God. Again, notice that in both this passage and in Jeremiah 19, God uses positive moral terms to apply to infants who die—“innocent” and “good.” Those are moral terms that God does not use willy-nilly.

10) God created all people personally, and designed them to glorify him forever—either by justly suffering in hell, or by giving glory to them in heaven (Ps 139:13-15; Rom 9:224). If infants who died were sent to hell, they would not be suffering justly, as they did not sin in a willful way. In other words, the very justification for hell (namely, and expression of God’s justice) is thwarted if infants go there.

11) Job was a righteous man (Job 2:9), but he suffered tremendously. Job knew what the afterlife was like—after all, it was Job who wrote:

I know my redeemer lives, and in the end he will stand on the earth. Even after my skin is destroyed, I will see God in my flesh. I will look at him myself, my eyes will look at him, and not as I look at a stranger. How my heart yearns within me! (Job 19:25-27)

Yet Job also wished that he would have been still-born. He says in Job 3:11-15 that he honestly thought that his life would be easier had he died in the womb. He is not some gothic poet, but is a godly man, who understand the afterlife, the reality of hell, and the need for a redeemer.

12) Job 3:16-19 is the most explicit passage in the Bible concerning the fate of infants who die. Job declares that dead infants go to a place where “There the wicked cease to make trouble, and there the weary find rest. The captives are completely at ease; they do not hear the voice of their oppressor. Both the small and the great are there, and the slave is set free from his master.”

Obviously Job is not describing hell, and his generic use of “infants” as well as “a stillborn child” implies that this is a statement with universal application. All infants who die or who are stillborn go to a place of rest, where there are kings, rich, poor, and the afflicted, and they are all free from torment. This is obviously not a description of hell.

13) Solomon makes a similar and explicit proclamation about the fate of dead infants. He expressly contrasts the fate of the wicked who labor in vain with a dead infant fathered by that wicked person. He concludes that it would be better to be the dead child, because he at least will go to a place of “rest” (Ecc 6:5). Solomon goes on to say that both the child and the father will die, but only the dead child will experience rest.

14) When David’s infant son was sick, David fasted and prayed frantically. When he died, David was at peace and worshiped. His attendants were shocked by this act of worship, and asked what could possibly provoke a loving father to worship at his child’s death. David’s response is well-known: “I’ll go to him, but he will never return to me” (2 Sam 12:23). This is not the despondent response of a mourning parent. It is the confident response of a man after God’s own heart.

By the way, the idea that David was worshiping because he too was one day going to die is so twisted and out of touch with reality that it is difficult to understand. Have you ever seen a parent respond to a child’s death with joy because, hey—after all—that parent is going to one day die too? Moreover, that kind of anti-supernaturalism requires us to believe that David (David!) did not understand the afterlife. Hardly.

David mourning Absalom

15) Moreover, contrast his response to his infant son's death—for which David was primarily responsible—with his response to his other sons' death. When Absalom died, there was no death-bed conversion, and there was no mystery about his relationship with the Yahweh. David, who had done everything possible to spare Absalom's life, was so despondent that Joab had to warn him that unless he changed his attitude, he risked a coup by the troops. Meanwhile, David was shrieking, "My son, Absalom! Absalom, my son, my son!" If David's response to his infant's death was simply "I'll die too one day" then his response to Absalom's death is incomprehensible.

16) Isaiah refers to an age where children learn "the difference between good and evil" (Isa 7:16). In other words, there is an age where children still sin, but not because of their knowledge of sin. At the very least, this lets us know that God views the sins of infants as coming from a form of innocence, rather than from a discernment of good and evil.

Tomorrow we will continue this list with a look at what the NT teaches about those who die in infancy.

Yesterday we saw 16 verses in the OT that address the issue of what happens to little children who die. I hope you saw that the OT lays the groundwork for a category distinction: there are two kinds of sinners who die. There are those who die because of their sin nature, namely infants. And there are those who die because they love sin, and actively embrace it; namely, adults. This distinction is important to grasp because the NT does not reestablish it. Rather, Jesus and Paul both teach in such a way that the distinction is reinforced.

Again, if any of these verses trouble you, simply skip them, and let the weight of the full list be enough to convince you. The numbering picks up where yesterday left off.

17) Jesus blessed little children. There are no examples of Jesus blessing anyone who was in open rebellion to God. Again, much like Jonah 4, Jeremiah 19, 1 Kings 11, this (at the very least) creates a category distinction between sinful adults in rebellion against God, and the childlike innocence of children (Matt 18:3-5).

18) In Matthew 18, Jesus not only blesses the children, but uses them as an earthly analogy of childlike faith. He says that "unless you are converted and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child—this one is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." Everyone is free to debate what exactly Jesus means here, and there are Christian answers all over the spectrum. But at the very least, Jesus has to be implying that children in their current state would go to heaven if they died. Consider this statement: "my car is as fast as a cheetah, and unless your car is like a cheetah too, it can never be fast." Everyone can debate what it means to be fast, or how fast my car really is, or if your car even should be fast. But the entire analogy would break down if cheetahs were not indeed fast to begin with. That is the assumption that makes the analogy make sense. Whatever Jesus is saying Matthew 18, it only makes sense if the destination of children who die is an enviable one.

19) Romans 5:13-14 makes the category distinction between those who sin like Adam (adults) and those who sin because of the imputation of Adam's sin (infants). In making this distinction, Paul is carefully showing how death can reign even over those who don't sin like Adam. He is repeating the theological distinctions made in Duet 1:39, 24:16, Jer 19:4 and Jonah 4:11, and lending theological support to the understanding that infants will not be punished in hell for their sins. (John Piper explains why it is best to understand Romans 5:13-14 as reference to infant death in *Counted Righteous in Christ*, 95-100).

20) That category distinction (between those who sin willingly and those who are born with a sin nature) is further strengthened by Paul's introduction of those who sin by searing their conscience, and how that sin is seen in idolatry and sexual immorality—both sins that infants are incapable of. Because that passage sets the stage for understanding the soteriology of Romans, it is significant for this discussion that out of the gate, Paul frames the conversation in terms that exclude infants, and then seals that exclusion explicitly in Romans 5:13-14.

21) Jesus also validates this category distinction when he declares that there are people who die “in their sins” (John 8:24). Everyone who dies, dies because they are sinners by nature. If infants weren't sinners by nature, they wouldn't die! But there is a particular class of sinners—namely cognizant adults—that actively reject God. Those ones not only die, but they “die in their sins” because of their unbelief.

22) John 3 furthers this category distinction by teaching that people “Everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed” (John 3:20). This simply does not describe infants who die, and the proximity to judgment passages (vv 18-19) validates this distinction.

23) Jesus lays claim in a particular way to the concept that children have a unique relationship to the Father. He declares that we should watch out for “children” in the faith, and it is best to see that admonition as applying to immature believers, rather than to actual children. But the analogy only works if actual immature children are to be the recipients of special care from people and God both. As MacArthur wrote, “No parent with six children is going to discover one of them missing and callously say ‘oh well, we still have five more’.” The analogy makes sense only if children are under God's care in a special way.

24) People from every tribe, language, nation and ethnicity will be in heaven (Rev 5:10). Because so many languages and tribes have died out, this is only feasible through the salvation of infants. By the way, this is certainly given as a powerful claim to the glory of God's saving nature.

25) All judgment passages in the Bible make clear that people go to hell for their active sin. This is especially clear in the description of hell in Revelation 21:8. People go to hell for what they have done, and this truth would be incomprehensible if infants were sent there.

26) The lists that are found in judgment passages are sins that infants lack the ability to commit. Jesus gives his list in Matt 15:19-20: “evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, sexual immoralities, thefts, false testimonies, blasphemies. These are the things that defile a man, but eating with unwashed hands does not defile a man.” Let me ask this question: which category of sins best describe the way infants sin? Do they murder and lust, or do they eat with unwashed hands?

At the end of this list, two things should be crystal clear. First, the Bible makes a category distinction between those who sin willingly (adults) and those who sin by their nature (infants). Adults can discern between right and wrong, and they love the wrong. They rebel against God despite natural revelation, and they will be judged for their works. Infants have a sin nature (that is why some of them die), but they do not sin IN THE SAME WAY as adults.

Second: with the exception of Job 3, there are not any passages that say “infants go to heaven when they die.” However, given the category distinction just made, it is obvious that every single time the Bible mentions infants who die, there is some indication that they receive mercy. It is not like there are six verses that talk about them going to heaven, and six that imply hell, and we are left to wrestle through. Every single verse that mentions this offers hope of heaven, and the cumulative weight should be overwhelming. There are other theological truths we agree to that are developed from way fewer references than this. Thus, the case for infant salvation is unassailable, as there are literally no verses that teach the contrary.

Today, the deal for the comment thread is this: in order to comment, you have to have read all three posts.