

PassionLife

WHAT HAPPENS TO CHILDREN WHO DIE?



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First, according to the Bible, all people are one-of-a-kind, handmade creations—created in the womb by God’s direct and personal design. David’s first response to this wonder was worship! “You formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother’s womb.

I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.” (Psalm 139:13-15).

Second, while each human being is a handcrafted piece of artwork, we are all, without exception, created in God’s image, designed to know Him as our Creator and Lord and reflect His glory (Genesis 1:26-27). It has been well-said, “*Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever,*” (Westminster Shorter Catechism).

Third, because of our sinful nature, every human being turns from trusting God, and seeks their own happiness apart from God. “As it is written, ‘None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside, ...’” (Romans 3:10-12).

Fourth, breaking faith with the eternally good God is an eternally evil sin, and as Scripture declares, “the just wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). Every human lives under the penalty of death, first physically and then, after the Great Day of Judgment, eternally.

Fifth, every human being will face the just and everlasting judgment of the Lord for their sinful rebellion in one of two ways: either directly and personally on the Day of Judgment (Revelation 20:8), or mercifully, relying wholly on Christ's death as a substitutionary punishment for their sins, trusting the cross He bore was full punishment paid for the full punishment due for each sin and all sins (1 Corinthians 15:3). There is no other way of escaping eternal death apart from faith in the grace of God offered through Christ (John 14:6). This is the call of the gospel.

Where does this leave those who are developmentally unable to respond to the call of the gospel? For example, what does the Bible teach us about infants and toddlers, or even unborn children who die from natural causes or abortion while still developmentally embryos or fetuses (little ones)?

The Bible does not state, but everywhere implies, that children who die are with God in Heaven. How this happens is hidden behind the inscrutable mercy of God. We do not see in Scripture an explanation of how the saving work of Christ applies to these children who die by miscarriage, abortion, or as infants, but it does. They are with the Lord and enjoying Him forever.

One way the Bible implies that children, born and unborn, rest in God's presence is by the use of children as symbols of innocence and trust. They exemplify faith in God. Faith in God is rewarded with eternal life. It makes no sense for children to be symbols of faith if children are punished with damnation.

The other way the Bible implies that young children who die are with God is by affirming that Hell is the final, just punishment for those who *consciously* reject God's authority over their lives by their unbelief and unrepentant acts of evil. We are judged for what we do, good or evil. Unborn children and newborn babies do not consciously reject or embrace God. Yes, from conception, every human being has a sinful nature. This is David's meaning when he writes, "in sin did my mother conceive me," (Psalm 51:5). But the

unborn and infants have not matured enough to know right from wrong or to choose one over the other. Final judgment is delayed so that the justice of God's judgment might be evident to all. But in the case of infants, the reasons for judgment would remain invisible and appear unjust, as there are no volitional acts to show.

Where in Scripture do we see the implication that children who die are with the Lord?



- 1) Infants belong to God in a special and intimate way. Indeed, God calls them “my children.” In Ezekiel 16:21-22, God describes His profound offense at child-sacrifice. In denouncing this wickedness, notice the personal and endearing language God uses for children: “And you took your sons and your daughters, whom you had borne *to me*...you slaughtered *my children* and delivered them up as an offering by fire.”
- 2) God describes children as “having no knowledge of good and evil” (Deuteronomy 1:39). All human beings are conceived with a sinful nature (Psalm 51:5). So the reference to children not yet knowing good or evil is significant. It implies that accountability for sin comes only when we reach a level of maturity or self-awareness enabling us to know right from wrong.

- 3) Isaiah makes the same distinction. “For before the boy knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land whose two kings you dread will be deserted” (Isaiah 7:16). Clearly, God recognizes His own design for human development and acknowledges that unborn children, infants, and toddlers have yet to develop moral capacity. Being innocent of what they are doing implies that they are judged accordingly. As such...
- 4) God’s judgment is on the basis of human volition, not human nature. “The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself” (Ezekiel 18:20). This implies that children, who have not matured to the point where they can volitionally do right or wrong, cannot be judged on such a basis. In this sense, they are innocent.
- 5) God refers to children as “innocents” (Jeremiah 19:4). This does not mean they are without a sinful nature, but it does imply that they have not matured enough to be judged as moral agents. None of their actions arise out of a volitional intent to sin that would make their punishment just.
- 6) When God punished Israel for their sinful defiance in the wilderness, He passed judgment only on those who were of fighting age or older (Deuteronomy 1:39). This shows that culpability for sin comes with maturity.
- 7) God does not punish children for the sins of their parents. If He did, it would be possible for children to fall under judgment. But Deuteronomy 24:16 affirms a foundational principle: “Fathers shall not be put to death because of their children, nor shall children be put to death because of their fathers. Each one shall be put to death for his own sin.” Since small children lack moral capacity and can willfully do neither right nor wrong, there is nothing to be condemned.
- 8) Job was a righteous man (Job 2:9) who put his hope in God. Deep in the pain of his sufferings, he lamented that he had not been stillborn. “Why

did I not die at birth, come out from the womb and expire?” (Job 3:11). He thought his life would be easier had he died at birth. This implies being with God in Heaven and not suffering the eternal separation of Hell.

- 9) In Job 3:16-19, Job continues to expand his thought on dying in the womb. “Why was I not as a hidden stillborn child, as infants who never see the light?” He sees his current suffering as far worse than his life experience would be had he died in the womb. Had he died as an unborn child, he would be in a place where “the wicked cease to make trouble [for you], 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.” This ‘rest’ is a fitting description of Heaven, not Hell.
- 10) Solomon observes that a man can live a rich life but miss the true and lasting satisfaction of God in his life. “I say that a stillborn child is better off than he” (Ecclesiastes 6:3). This can be true only if the dead child is experiencing true and lasting happiness. Solomon declares that the unborn child who dies, while never seeing light, nonetheless is at “rest” (6:5). There is nothing about Hell that is restful. Restfulness is the blessing of being with God.
- 11) When David’s infant son was sick, David mourned, fasted, and prayed that God would spare him. After the child died, David dressed and stopped mourning. Those around him thought he should wail and lament. David defended his actions with a statement of hope that implies heavenly rest for his child and a future reunion with him: “I’ll go to him, but he will never return to me” (2 Samuel 12:23).
- 12) The bedrock of our trust in God is that He will always act justly (Genesis 18:25). If babies 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, as the expression of God’s justice) is thwarted if infants go there.

- 13)** Jesus blessed little children (Mark 10:16). There are no examples of Jesus blessing anyone who was in open rebellion to God. Again, much like the Old Testament references above, Jesus is creating a category distinction between sinful adults in rebellion against God, and the childlike innocence of children.
- 14)** In Matthew 18:3-5, Jesus uses children as the very example of faith and trust. Childlike faith implies saving faith. Jesus 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.” The assumption that makes the analogy work is that children demonstrate a faith toward God that is saving.
- 15)** If the unborn and infants do not sin in the sense of choosing evil and rejecting good, why do they die at all? The reason everyone dies, including the unborn and infants, is because everyone is born a sinner by nature. Mysteriously, Adam acted on behalf of us all, meaning, as he sinned, we all sinned. Or as Paul writes, “just as sin came into the world through one man, [Adam] and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned [in Adam]” (Romans 5:12). But judgment after death is not based on being sinful by nature, but on our myriad acts of rebellion and wickedness.
- 16)** Divine judgment is administered on the basis of sins *consciously* committed in the body. “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil” (2 Corinthians 5:10). That final judgment is pictured in Revelation 20 where all people are present and then prosecuted for their sinful deeds. “The dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done” (v.12). Of course, an embryo, preborn child, or infant, while human, has not done anything good or evil at this point due to their moral immaturity. There is nothing to be judged.

17) Passages that warn of judgment describe in list form the kinds of sins that justify judgment because they reflect unrepentant hatred for God. None of these sins describe the unborn or infants. In Matthew 15:19, the list includes “evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, sexual immoralities, thefts, false testimonies, blasphemies.” 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 says, “Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.” Revelation 21:8 says, “But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.” People go to Hell for what they have done, actions that reflect an unrepentant rejection of God as their Lord. This truth would be incomprehensible if infants were sent to Hell.

Conclusion: Scripture consistently implies that children who die are with the Father in Heaven. There are no verses that imply the opposite. Further, these little ones will receive glorified bodies when all the redeemed receive one. A baby who dies as an embryo or infant is not stuck being a baby in Heaven any more than a blind man is stuck being blind or the 100-year-old will be stuck with gray hair and wrinkles for eternity. Therefore, we may rest in the truth that unborn children, infants, and toddlers who die are with the Lord and, with perfect understanding, are enjoying Him.

Recommended Resources:

Ronald Nash, *When a Baby Dies* (Zondervan, 1999).

John MacArthur, *Safe in the Arms of God* (Thomas Nelson, 2003).