

“Pastor’s Point of View: Where Do Babies/Small Children Who Die Spend Eternity?”

By Joel R. Breidenbaugh, PhD

I’ve been asked the above question a few times. I’ve searched the Scriptures to see if God has revealed anything to us about this matter. When parents lose a baby in the womb, or one who lives for only a few days, or even a small child lost to an accident, my natural inclination is to offer comfort. As a minister of the gospel, I always want to offer comfort which is biblically-based. That is to say, it ultimately does no good to offer comfort, if the consoling words are based on a lie. So, where do babies and small children who die spend eternity? I believe God gives us words of comfort and hope.

First, we can turn to a text like Deuteronomy 1. The Lord is explaining to Moses that the older generation of Israelites will not be allowed to enter the Promised Land because of their disobedience. God adds, however, “And as for your little ones, who you said would become a prey, and your children, who today have no knowledge of good or evil, they shall go in there. And to them I will give it, and they shall possess it” (1:39). Who are the little ones who have “no knowledge of good and evil”? Clearly, they would include babies, small children, and probably even the mentally challenged. Though everyone is born with a sin nature, we often refer to these without knowledge of good and evil as not yet reaching an “age of accountability”—the stage of moral accountability and understanding (more on the sin issue below).

How does Deuteronomy 1 apply to eternity? God tells us that the Promised Land is a picture, a foreshadowing of heaven as an eternal resting place. The promise of entering God’s rest still stands, as is found in Hebrews 3:7-4:13. Just as the innocent Israelites were allowed entrance into the land of promise, so the young, innocent children of this world who die go to be with God in His rest.

As proof that reading the biblical text this way is not out-of-bounds, look at an event in the life of King David in 2 Samuel 12. David had sinned by sleeping with another man’s wife, Bathsheba. As a result of this act, Bathsheba became pregnant and had a baby. To teach David a lesson about the seriousness of his sin, God told David that the child would die (2 Samuel 12:14). David pleaded for God’s grace to allow the child to live, even to the point of much prayer and fasting. The child, nevertheless, did die, and David no longer fasted and prayed for him. When David’s servants questioned him about the change in his demeanor, he replied, “While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept, for I said, ‘Who knows whether the LORD will be gracious to me, that the child may live?’ But now he is dead. Why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me” (12:22-23).

Here we see a clear resolve in David about the sufficiency of God. No doubt David deeply wanted the child to live. When the child died, however, David remained confident in being able to be with him one day. I don’t believe David is talking about joining his child in the grave one day, because David knew about his own eternal destiny, as he affirmed, “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever” (Psalm 23:6). David would be with God forever in heaven, and that is where he would see his deceased child.

Another text deals with the teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus said to His disciples about children, “See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of My Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 18:10). Jesus then adds a statement about the shepherd’s joy at finding his lost sheep, an analogy about preserving little children. The conclusion is straightforward: “So it is not the will of My Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish” (18:14). The word “perish” means to be cut off for all eternity (i.e. be sent to hell). Jesus says that it isn’t God’s will for a little one to go to hell.

What about this notion of the children's "angels"? What does that mean? It most likely has to do with what we call "guardian" angels. Concerning angels we are told, "Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?" (Hebrews 1:14). Thus, angels serve (guard) those who are to inherit salvation. What Jesus says about little children's angels seems to imply that the angels guard over the little children so that they don't perish.

Because of these texts, I believe that babies, small children, and those with a significant mental challenge who die in those states are ushered into the very presence of God in heaven. But such a belief brings up the question: "How does God save such people if salvation comes by God's grace through man's faith and sinners without faith won't be saved?"

We are indeed all sinners—every man, woman, boy, and girl. When Adam sinned in the Garden of Eden, we sinned as his posterity (see Romans 5:12). Our sin separates us from the holy God, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

It is also quite clear in Scripture that "by grace you have been saved through faith" (Ephesians 2:8). The only way a sinner can be saved is through faith in Jesus Christ. Such faith is in response to the grace of God at work through the gospel message.

"Aha!" you say, "you are contradicting yourself, for you agree that sinners are saved by God's grace through faith and yet small children cannot believe, but should they die, you are claiming they are saved." No, I'm not. I never said they were saved. But I do agree with a multitude of theologians throughout church history who say that babies, small children, and the mentally challenged who die are kept safe by God's grace.

Do you see the difference? On the one hand, sinners are "saved" by God's grace through faith in Christ. On the other hand, small children who die are "kept safe" by God's grace. It is a different thing to say that God saves through faith and that He keeps safe certain ones. It is not a contradiction; only apparent at best. While the former truth is much clearer in Scripture, I truly believe the Bible affirms the latter, too.

The next time you know of someone who loses a baby in pregnancy, or someone whose mentally challenged child passes away, or a person whose small child dies of some unexplained accident or rare disease, it's always appropriate to comfort them with the truth. Even the Apostle Paul said, "But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope" (1 Thessalonians 4:13). The falling "asleep" refers to death, which is temporal for believers and all those "innocent" who go to be with Christ.

We surely grieve the loss of any loved one, but unlike the world, we have hope in the Word and work of God. So shed a tear with all who sorrow over the untimely deaths of their little ones, but let that tear be filled with hope in the God who saves and keeps safe by His grace and for His glory.¹

May you find comfort and help in these words,

Pastor Joel Breidenbaugh

¹Over the years I've found the following articles helpful on the issue of "infant salvation": DG Staff, "What Happens to Infants Who Die?" at www.desiringgod.org, R. Albert Mohler, Jr., "God, the Tsunami and the Death of Children" at www.towersonline.net, and R. Albert Mohler, Jr., and Daniel L. Akin, "Why We Believe Children Who Die Go to Heaven," at www.sebts.edu.