



Infant Salvation After the Fall

One of the most important issues raised by the fall is the question of what happens to infants who die in their infancy or at an early age. It is common to find people stating that infants are saved. But a clearly thought out justification for the belief that infants are saved is rarely offered. For parents who lose a child, one of the greatest concerns is the destiny of their child. It is important that those parents have a clear understanding of how and why children who die in their infancy are saved. There is much confusion about whether or not infants can be and are saved among conservative Christians. Original sin is an apparent obstacle to salvation according to some and there is much debate about which children, if any, are saved. Among Christians who address this issue, there are several broad categories of views. Before providing a biblical argument for a particular position it would be helpful to identify the different views.

Baptismal Regeneration This view is most widely recognized as the position of the Roman Catholic Church. There are a number of other groups, particularly Lutheran and Episcopalian churches that hold this view. One of the difficulties of this view is in explaining what happens to unbaptized children. The Roman view has tried to address this with the suggestion that such children go to Limbo, a place that is neither heaven nor hell. There is no biblical support for this idea within the 66 canonical books and it appears the doctrine is more of an accommodation to solve a problem than it is a serious theological answer to the question.

Only Infants of True Believers are Saved This view is held by conservative Christians who take sin seriously. They acknowledge that no one can be saved without the work of Christ. They justify the salvation of children of believers by pointing to the covenantal statements in Scripture that say “The promise is for you and your children” (Acts 2:39). There clearly is a covenantal element in God’s working within human history as is seen in the Old Testament with the various covenants with Abraham and others and continuing into the New Testament. Those who hold this view state that children can be saved through the regenerative work of God that also impacts adults. In their view, the children who are included in the covenant

community share in certain benefits that include salvation if they die in their infancy. While this view does have some sound theological foundations it is of concern that a child who died in his infancy would be sent to hell if he did not have the right parents.

No Infants are Saved This is a significantly minority position. This view also takes sin seriously. Those holding this position say that in the absence of the exercise of faith and a receiving of the gospel no one can be saved. A child cannot be innocent because he has original sin that corrupts him in spite of his apparent innocence. This view tends to be held by groups of devout believers who would like to think children can be saved but who recognize the clear biblical emphasis on the need for faith to receive salvation. Since there is no basis for thinking that very young children who lack any significant cognitive ability can understand the gospel and believe, it is held by this group that children are not saved.

All Infants are Saved/Universalists This group simply affirms that infants are saved because they are innocents. In their view, there is nothing for which the child could be held accountable and original sin is not a factor. The primary problem with this view is that David denies in Psalm 51 that there is an initial innocence in children. His statement that he was conceived in sin appears to attach sin to the unborn.

All Infants are Saved/Non-Universalists This view affirms that all children who die in their infancy are saved due to the mercy of God that overcomes original sin and the fallen nature. In the sections that follow this view will be offered as the best answer to the question of what Scripture says happens to children who die at an early age. Scripture does not state a specific age at which all children who die are saved. However, it can be affirmed that all very young children are saved. In the gray areas where questions are raised about older children, the knowledge that God is more merciful and full of grace than any mere mortal and that He will always do what is right, can give hope and peace to grieving parents.



Rather than debate the merits of the various views listed above, it would be more beneficial to offer the arguments in favor of the last view and those arguments should make it clear why the alternative views are not correct. The arguments in favor of all children who die in their infancy being saved fall into several categories and together provide powerful evidence that children who die are saved by God.

GOD HAS A STRONG LOVE FOR CHILDREN

The first question that could be raised is whether God would in any way be motivated to save children who die in their infancy. The Scriptures make a strong case for God's love for children and that they can be viewed as proper objects of his saving grace. God shows his love for children in a variety of ways in both the Old and New Testaments. God resists destroying a city that is guilty of great sins because of the number of children present in the city.

Jonah 4:9-11 But God said to Jonah, "Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?" "I do," he said. "I am angry enough to die." But the Lord said, "You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?"

God has set apart children as having a special place in creation to give Him praise. Psalm 8 is referenced by Jesus during the Triumphal Entry.

Psalm 8:1, 2 O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise because of your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger.

Jesus offers children as an example of those in the kingdom of heaven and as an example of salvation. Both Jesus and the Father are portrayed in Scripture as being protective of children, warning adults against corrupting these examples of salvation.

Matthew 18:1-6 At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" He called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the great-

est in the kingdom of heaven. "And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.

Matthew 18:10-14 "See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven. "What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.

Mark 10:15 I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them.

Paul ascribes innocence to children when he contrasts behavior, where the Corinthians are to be as infants toward evil, with thought, where the Corinthians are to be adults.

1 Corinthians 14:20 Brothers, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults.

Jesus equates the treatment of children with treatment of himself. To welcome a child is to welcome Jesus and the Father.

Mark 9:35-37 Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all." He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me."

Jesus is abrupt and demanding in insisting that children have free access to him so that he can lay hands on them and bless them.

Matthew 19:13, 14 Then little children were brought to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked those who brought them. Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these."



In the parallel passage in Mark (10:13–16), the language is shorter and choppier, possibly to convey the urgency of Jesus' demand that the children be free to come to him. The passage says literally, "Allow the children to come to me. Do not hinder them."

God's love for children should be clear from the preceding passages. Children are offered as examples of salvation, they are protected and to welcome them is to welcome God. This does not prove in any final way that children can be saved but it does create the basis for believing that God would be predisposed to save them. Certainly the statement "your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost" in Matthew 18 leads one to think that God desires to save infants. Additionally, it is somewhat intuitive that the creator would not be likely to offer as a model for salvation a human in the infant stage who in that stage either could not be saved at all or who required some external action, specific parents or some ceremony to be saved. The examples Jesus offers in the passages above are children who are unbaptized and they do not, at that time belong to any "Christian" organization since no such organization exists. To present such children as examples of salvation if they cannot be saved would be like offering fire as an example of cold or night as an example of sunlight.

HOW COULD INFANTS BE SAVED?

Since Jesus and the Father show that they are favorably disposed toward children, it must then be determined how it is possible that children could be saved. In considering this question the issue is not how are infants saved in a way different than adults are saved. There is no indication in Scripture that children are saved differently than adults. Rather, the question is, given that adults are saved in a certain way, how can God save children using the same salvation method. To properly address this issue, it is necessary first to consider how adults are saved. A number of passages give helpful insights into this process.

If you would like to read more of this article, it is available in *The Beginning: A Second Look at the First Sin*