

What Happens When Children Die?

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What Happens When Children Die?

I. Introduction

A. Illustration: Sam and Mary's Story

1. Sam and Mary were in their late twenties. They met in college and were married in the church that Mary's family attended three or four times a year. Sam and Mary seldom attended the church although they said they "belonged" to it.
2. Their first child was a beautiful little girl named Amy. One night when she was three, Amy came down with a fever that grew progressively worse as the night wore on. About three in the morning, Amy's condition became so critical that Sam and Mary rushed her to an emergency room. By 8 am, Amy was dead.¹

B. Now what? How are Sam and Mary supposed to cope with and process what happened to their daughter? How are they supposed to think about what happened? How do they make sense of it?

C. Comfort, real deep seated long lasting actually helpful comfort, doesn't happen unless it is attached to something real. Perspective and hope connected to truth is where genuine comfort can be found. Clichés are not helpful. Wishful thinking will not heal deep emotions. Real answers connected to reality influences how we think about and respond to situations that cause pain and suffering. Truth is the starting point and foundation of coping, comfort, and healing. For this reason, knowing the truth about the fate of children who die is an appropriate place to begin the journey toward healing.

D. The primary purpose of what follows is to give a Biblical understanding with the hope of laying the groundwork for being able to cope with the death of a young child in ways that lead to recovery, health, and healing. This is not a purely academic issue; it is in a sense intellectual because we are trying to figure out what to believe, what is true. However, the purpose of this intellectual activity is person centered. The goal is to promote comfort to those who are grieving. Gaining insight and knowledge is not the final objective, it is a means to the end: help people process what happened and have an intellectual framework that helps us cope with

II. Thinking Through the Issue

A. How do we even begin process such a difficult and traumatic situation? Strategy is important. We must begin by trying to discover and adopt the perspective of God Himself by understanding what His Word, the Bible, says about this issue. We need to accumulate all of the relevant Biblical data and conceptualize the best available view that makes the most sense of that information. We want the whole perspective of God on the death of children. This means doing the work of theology. We start by finding and studying all the places in the Bible where this important issue is touched. Once all the information is gathered. Then we begin putting the pieces together. We attempt to figure out what each passage or verse is teaching about the topic and come up with a view that harmonizes all of the Biblical teaching into a coherent whole that takes into account everything the Bible says. We don't pick and choose the

¹ Ronald Nash *When A Baby Dies: Answers to comfort grieving Parents* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 14.

passages we like, our view should even accommodate those verses that are difficult and those that challenge our current understanding.

- B. Once we have the best Biblical view among the different options, we enter into the most difficult part of the whole process: figuring out when and where our view and its various parts apply in the real world. While keeping our Biblical view in mind, we assess various situations that confront us. We do our best to apply what we know to what we experience with the hope that our perspective is true and harmonizes with the thoughts of God. This is by far the most difficult part of this whole enterprise. Some cases are easy, if a baby is stillborn, it is a fairly simple application process. However, when children start to reach the ages of 6-10, the application process gets much tougher because we need to know the internal condition of the child—which we don't have access to. Some cases are black and white; others have a lot of grey. Sometimes we simply have to do our best with what we have.
- C. With this strategy in mind, how do we begin thinking about the tragedy of children dying? Some will immediately respond by thinking that we can't know what happens in these cases. The Bible never directly addresses the issue. In a sense, this thinking is correct. Nowhere in the Bible does it directly state or give a clear presentation of the condition of the soul of babies or young children after they have died. Although this is true, it is a mistake to draw the conclusion that we can't know anything about the eternal fate of young children or those who are mentally incapable of knowing the difference between right and wrong or understanding the message of Jesus.
- D. We draw conclusions about things not specifically or directly addressed in the Bible all the time. For one simple example I want to ask you a question. Do you have a Biblical view about whether you should obey the speed limit or not when you are driving? It's fair to say that followers of Jesus who are informed will draw the right conclusion that they have a moral obligation to obey the speed limit. Why? Vehicles didn't exist when the Bible was written and therefore they are not ever directly addressed. Doesn't this mean we can't know what God's perspective is in this case? Instead of remaining in confusion or denial, followers of Jesus take what the Bible says (facts, ideas, morality, and principles) and apply it in morally relevant ways to situations not directly discussed in the Bible. To speed or not to speed is an example. We can take the moral principle of obeying the governing authorities over us as applicable to the issue of speeding (1 Pet. 2:13-15). In a similar way, we can take what the Bible does say and relevantly apply it to the situation of the death of children. Just because the Bible doesn't directly deal with the death of children doesn't mean the Bible doesn't say anything meaningful or helpful about it.
- E. Our goal is to use good Bible study techniques (hermeneutics) to develop good Biblical views (theology) so that we can apply those perspectives (practical theology) in accurate ways (logic and moral reasoning) to the situations we face (application). All this is regular activity for the disciple as they carry out the Christian life. None of this should be foreign to us.
- F. Also, some may think that we need absolute undeniable certainty if we are going to believe anything on this issue. Again, this perspective is understandable but this is not how thinking works. We believe all kinds of ideas without absolute certainty. One hundred percent certainty

is pretty rare when it comes to human understanding (epistemology). We live our lives by a much less demanding standard for knowledge all the time. The intellectually responsible person takes the information they have and use it to develop the best views available to them in light of what they know and the different views available.² This doesn't require certainty. All we need to do is answer the question: Given everything I know about what the Bible says on this topic, is it more likely that children go to heaven or hell? If the scales are tipped in one direction by 51 percent verse 49 percent, the reasonable person will hold the most plausible view even if that doesn't mean certainty.

III. The Biblical Case for the Fate of Heaven

- A. With a strategy firmly in place we are ready to begin our examination of what the Bible says about the death of children. Here, we have two general approaches to consider. First, we could take a big picture approach to this issue by providing a more comprehensive case using several Biblical arguments and much data but not going into much detail. Examining many passages throughout the Bible will give us a picture of the expansive ground that needs to be covered. We could examine a large list of passages that have relevance for our topic. The strength of this approach would be familiarity with all of the Biblical data on this issue. However, this might be overwhelming and not as helpful as one would think. Typically, this will lead to more questions than answers. Plus, this approach would be difficult to accomplish in the time we have.
- B. The other approach, and the one we will take, is to provide a few of the strongest biblical arguments and go into greater detail while neglecting the other available information. This approach will help provide clarity and it can be persuasive if the case is a strong one. The liability here is that many questions will go unanswered and there is the possibility of some people thinking other passages of Scripture contradict the arguments that are presented. Even with these liabilities, this more selective approach will be adopted.
- C. The best Biblical view in light of all the information on this topic is the position that all children who die without the intellectual and moral capacities to know the difference between right and wrong or comprehend their moral accountability to God are saved and therefore go to heaven at death.³ In other words, there are human beings who are unable to utilize the faculties necessary for being a moral agent.⁴ A strong argument (reasons leading to a conclusion) can be offered that is based on firm Biblical claims.⁵

² It could be that one particular view is not entirely convincing, there are some unanswered questions, yet when compared to the others views, it is the most credible option. If other views are worse than the one being considered, even if there isn't an airtight case, a person should believe the view that is most credible.

³ For more on this topic see Ronald Nash's excellent treatment *When A Baby Dies: Answers to comfort grieving Parents* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), John MacArthur *safe in the arms of God: truth from heaven about the death of a child* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2003) and for a more academic approach see Robert Webb *The Theology of Infant Salvation* (Hinton: Sprinkle Publications, 1998).

⁴ Since they are human beings they possess these qualities but they are only potential—they are never realized or actualized. For whatever reason, either due to level of physical/mental development or some physical defect, some human beings never develop the capacities required for being a moral agent. The capacities are possessed but are only potential. When the hindrances preventing these potential capacities from being used are removed, these human beings become moral agents and function in the way God originally intended as full functioning human beings.

⁵ I have adopted the argument from Ronald Nash and added other information from other sources and some of my own thoughts.

- D. First, infants and young children are incapable of moral good or evil. The Bible indicates there is a condition in early human physical development that is commonly called “the age of accountability.” While I don’t like this label because this condition isn’t attached to age it is attached to level of physical development. The first appearance of this condition is found in Deuteronomy 1:39, “³⁹ Moreover, your little ones who you said would become a prey, and your sons, who this day have no knowledge of good or evil, shall enter there, and I will give it to them and they shall possess it.” God is punishing the people He brought out of Egypt because they refused to obey Him. God is going to judge them by not allowing them to enter the land He promised to them. The Jewish adults are concerned about the fate of their children. God responds by telling them their children will enter the land and receive the promise even though they are being judged. God gives the moral reasoning for His decision, the children, “have no knowledge of good or evil.” Since this is their condition, God will not judge or punish them; He doesn’t hold them accountable for anything yet.
- E. We see this condition again in Isaiah, “¹⁴ Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel. ¹⁵ He will eat curds and honey at the time He knows *enough* to refuse evil and choose good. ¹⁶ For before the boy will know *enough* to refuse evil and choose good, the land whose two kings you dread will be forsaken.” (Isa. 7:14-16). We get an even greater description of the condition of young children not yet being moral agents and therefore not being morally accountable to God, “for before the boy will know *enough* to refuse evil and choose good,”. This is the starting condition of every child. Eventually this condition changes and individuals being culpable and accountable to God, “at the time He knows *enough* to refuse evil and choose good.” As a person develops physically, most importantly mentally, they reach a point where they become morally aware. The mind is required for this as moral reasoning is a function of the mind which is dependent on the physical brain. Therefore, the physical brain develops to a point where moral awareness and moral reasoning becomes possible for the mind. At this point of development a person’s condition before God changes and they become accountable to Him for their moral actions.
- F. Perhaps the closest we can come, to a specific point in time, where we can recognize that a person has reached the point where they are morally responsible to God is James 4:17, “¹⁷ Therefore, to one who knows *the* right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin.” This is the most precise we can get to the “age of accountability.”⁶ Notice though, it is not a specific age but a developmental condition. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume different individuals will reach this point at different times. Some children may reach this point earlier, some later, and some individuals will never reach it. Their conscience is not yet function in the intended manner designed by God: revealing moral and personal guilt or innocence (Rm. 2:14-16).
- G. The condition of moral innocence comes up again when God is explaining to Jonah why He is concerned about the judgment deserved for the people of Nineveh. If the people of that city do

⁶ The specific requirements for reaching this point is debated and we can’t be dogmatic on this issue. At a minimum, a general moral awareness of the difference between right and wrong is required. Perhaps even an awareness of accountability to God as a moral agent might be entailed as well (Rm. 1:18-32). How much knowledge of God is required to be morally accountable is anyone’s guess? Some think a mental capacity to be able to understand the message of Jesus is also required. Again, the specifics are debated.

not change the way they are living, God is going to punish them. God is sending Jonah to warn them with the plan that the warning will turn them around. God tells Jonah, “¹¹ Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know *the difference* between their right and left hand, as well as many animals?” (Jon. 4:11). God has concern for a large number of people who, “do not know *the difference* between their right and left hand”. It seems likely that this would at least include young children.

- H. It is the condition of not knowing the difference between right and wrong that leads God to call babies, infants, and young children innocent. They are morally innocent because they don’t know the difference between right and wrong. Children are referred to this way by God, “⁴ Because they have forsaken Me and have made this an alien place and have burned sacrifices in it to other gods, that neither they nor their forefathers nor the kings of Judah had *ever* known, and *because* they have filled this place with the blood of the innocent ⁵ and have built the high places of Baal to burn their sons in the fire as burnt offerings to Baal, a thing which I never commanded or spoke of, nor did it *ever* enter My mind;” (Jer. 19:4-5). Children are also called innocent in Jeremiah 2:34. The people of Judah and Jerusalem had adopted the grotesque and cruel practices of those who reject God by burning their children alive as an offering to the false god Baal. God calls the children who are sacrificed this way, “innocent”. God considers those in this condition morally innocent even though they still possess an inherent sin nature—they are morally corrupt and broken as a result of being human. Therefore, even individuals in this condition need God’s grace and mercy in order to be rescued and brought to heaven.
- I. Second, God’s judgment is administered on the basis of actual sins committed in the body, “¹⁰ for we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.” (2 Cor. 5:10). Judgement is in response to what has already happened. In other words, people are punished for what they actually do. Justice demands the punishment of moral crimes. God does not punish people for what they might have done or could have done in the future. The judgment of God is distributed for things that actually happened. Therefore, if babies, infants, and young children haven’t ever committed any moral crimes against God it is reasonable to conclude they will not be judged or punished by Him. If there are no deeds in the body, then there is no judgment.
- J. Evil thoughts, impulses, desires, attitudes, and actions are what lead to God’s judgment, “⁹ Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, ¹⁰ nor thieves, nor *the* covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God. ¹¹ Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.” (1 Cor. 6:9-11).
- K. Most importantly God tells us what the grounding and basis of His final judgment is, “¹¹ Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them. ¹² And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is *the book* of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books,

according to their deeds.¹³ And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one *of them* according to their deeds.¹⁴ Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire.¹⁵ And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire." (Rev. 20:11-15). Those who had died, "were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds." A person's record of deeds is recorded in God's bookkeeping. When God judges, it will be the result based on the accumulation of deeds committed throughout a person's life as a moral agent.

- L. Individuals are not judged for rejecting Jesus (although if they do, that decision, will be an immoral deed for which they will be accountable) but for the wrong things they do—the instances in which their own conscience testified that they did wrong and experienced guilt. Individuals are punished for the wrong they do not their lack of trust in Jesus or their inability to hear the message of Jesus. Since this is the basis of God's judgment, anyone who hasn't committed any immoral deeds in life will not be judged.
- M. Third, babies and infants can be regenerated even before birth. This is going to be the most controversial claim and it will raise all kinds of other questions; understandingly and sympathetically so. However, it is absolutely clear that some babies were regenerate even before they were born. This demonstrates that it is at least possible and if it is possible they it could happen in other cases. It is clear that John the Baptist was regenerate before birth as he was filled with the Holy Spirit in the womb, "¹⁵ For he will be great in the sight of the Lord; and he will drink no wine or liquor, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb." (Lk. 1:15). God's Word says John the Baptist as a baby in the womb was regenerated. Immediately some will think, "Sure, but this is a very special circumstance." You're right. It is a special circumstance. Those who die as babies, infants, and young children, also seem to be in a unique and special circumstance as well.
- N. This notion of being regenerate as a baby could also be true of the prophet Jeremiah, "⁵ Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, And before you were born I consecrated you; I have appointed you a prophet to the nations." (Jer. 1:5). While more debatable than the previous passage, there is a sense here that Jeremiah received a special working of God while still in the womb. God knows every individual before they are conceived, He knows the life plan for each person, and in this case He even consecrated Jeremiah, "before you were born." It is entirely consistent to think that God chooses individuals for salvation who die before they enter the condition of morally accountability to Him. Salvation is a work of God alone and we add nothing to it.⁷ This becomes most obvious in cases when young children die.
- O. The principle at issue here is the source of salvation. If an individual being given eternal life (regeneration) is an exclusive act of God without any requirement on our part, then this is

⁷ Some think repentance and trust (faith) in Jesus are absolutely necessary for salvation. Usually this is the case, at least since the time of Jesus. Those prior to Jesus did not have to trust specifically in Him since this was yet unknown. If repentance and trust are always necessary conditions for salvation, then they contribute to salvation. You don't get salvation without them. However, if repentance and trust come as a RESULT of being saved (regenerate), then they don't always have to be demonstrated for salvation to exist. A person can be regenerate without the ability to express repentance and trust. At issue here are different theological systems: Arminianism and Calvinism (Reformed).

possible. If trust in Jesus occurs because (or after) God makes a person spiritually alive, there is no problem here. However, if trust in Jesus occurs before (or leads to) a person becoming spiritually alive, there is a problem. However, if this is the case, then our view may need to change to fit the Scriptures rather than understanding the Scriptures according to our view. In other words, if people reject this possibility it is rejected because of their theological perspective. If regeneration occurs prior to trust in Jesus and trust in Jesus is never expressed, we need to remember that this is under a special circumstance and this will not be true in other cases. For example, a capable adult cannot assume they are regenerate without evidencing repentance and trust since they are capable of them.

- P. Fourth and lastly, we learn of God’s acceptance of children through Jesus (Mt. 19:13-15, Mk. 10:13-16, Lk. 18:15-17). We’ll take a quick look at Luke, “¹⁵ And they were bringing even their babies to Him so that He would touch them, but when the disciples saw it, they *began* rebuking them. ¹⁶ But Jesus called for them, saying, “Permit the children to come to Me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. ¹⁷ Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it *at all*.” (Lk. 18:15-17). This is one of the clearest passages regarding the heart of Jesus, and therefore God, concerning children.
- Q. Here are a few observations, notice that children are being brought to Jesus trying to get access to Him. Access to Jesus is not always guaranteed, Jesus refused to let His own biological family gain access to Him but only those who heard the word of God and did it (Lk. 8:19-21). Access to Jesus, in some instances indicates a person’s standing in the kingdom of God. This dynamic seems to apply in this case since Jesus justifies access to Him on the basis, “for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these” (v. 16). Some think that Jesus is simply using an analogy here. Jesus is not saying children are part of the kingdom of God but those who are like children—typically thought of as humble—belong to the kingdom. While Jesus’ wording does make this interpretation understandable, it isn’t the most reasonable given the rest of the passage—the context. If Jesus was using an analogy here, the children would still be part of the kingdom. An analogy requires two points of reference with some feature in common for comparison. Two different things are alike in some way. If children are being used as an analogy of being a disciple, what is the point of comparison? It isn’t even mentioned by Luke. If Luke is accurately preserving the point of what Jesus is saying, how is an analogy possible? No point of similarity is listed on this analogy view since it is claimed the point of similarity is not being in the kingdom of God. If the situation of the children is an analogy the only point of comparison mentioned is that of belonging to the kingdom of God. If the analogy view is true, then the children are part of the kingdom of God! Interpreting this passage as an analogy can’t eliminate the idea that children are part of the kingdom of God.
- R. Further, Jesus directly states the kingdom of God is received by the children, “receive the kingdom of God like a child” (v. 17). It seems contrary to the text to say that Jesus never claimed the children were not part of the kingdom of God. But, how do they receive it? It seems unlikely that it is received by an intellectual conviction concerning the identity of Jesus or what He has done for them. There are “babies” (v. 15) included. This term refers to children from

birth to about two years old (when the child is fully weaned).⁸ Children receive the kingdom of God by no effort on the child's part by an act of God's grace.

- S. Even if this passage was an analogy, this won't explain how Jesus reacts to the disciples. Jesus command the disciples who were keeping the children away from Him, "do not hinder them," (v. 16). In the parallel passages Jesus gets angry when the children were prevented from gaining access to Him (Mk. 10:14). While Luke doesn't include it, although it is strongly implied, the children actually come to Jesus and He lays hands on them (Mt. 19:15), blesses them (Mk. 10:16), and possibly prayed for them (Mt. 19:13). Again, access to Jesus reflects their spiritual attachment to Him.
- T. For these reasons, it is best to see this passage as an affirmation by Jesus that young children belong to His kingdom which is why He granted them access to Himself and it was wrong to keep them away from Jesus or hinder them from coming to Him.
- U. With these four Biblical claims and pieces of information, a strong case can be made for zygotes, fetuses, unborn babies, babies, infants, toddlers, and other young children all belonging to the kingdom of God which results in their secured state of being in heaven at death. This argument combined with the complete absence of any hint of the same group being found in hell anywhere in Scripture adds further support. While there may be many unanswered questions, given the Biblical data, this seems to be the best available view. In light of this, parents who have lost a young child can receive tremendous comfort and hope regarding their lost children.

IV. Conclusion

- A. While there are differences of opinion on this issue, the view with the strongest Biblical support holds that children who are too young or are otherwise incapable of knowing the difference between right and wrong will not be guilty before God and therefore go immediately to heaven. There are a number of passages that indicate this along with good arguments based on these passages.
- B. This Biblical truth can provide some parents with absolute confidence that their child is in heaven. I rejoice with these parents. Others might have to live with some uncertainty. However, even in this condition there is an ever present hope that their child may be in heaven, they just can't know it. I contemplate with these parents. For those parents who have no good reason to think that their children ever responded to the message of Jesus yet were capable of doing so, even you can have hope. The power of God will one day enable you to accept this truth and at the same time experience the full comfort and joy God offers. You may not get to experience God's full healing in this life but you certainly will in the next. I ache with pain for these parents.

V. Questions for Further Thought

- A. What remaining questions, concerns, or challenges to this view do you have?
- B. How do Jesus' words in Mt. 18:6 and Mt. 11:25 affect the view that has been offered?
- C. What do you believe happens to children when they die? How did you come to hold that view?

⁸ Nursed by the mother and able to eat independently from her. Typically, this was until about two years of age at this time.

- D. What effect can this view have on a person's heart? How might it affect their view of God?
- E. How might parents who lost a child with this view respond differently to those with different views?