

Do babies go to heaven when they die?

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Today we begin our Good Question sermon series with this question: Do babies go to heaven when they die? And we could probably expand that question a tad. What about the mentally disabled? What happens to people who seem to lack the ability, the capacity to understand the most basic of truths and ideas when they die? Good question.

Questions come from places. Some come from curiosity, some come from necessity. This question, I think, largely comes from either fear or grief. Anxious moms holding their 1 month old baby girls at 1AM in the morning aren't rocking them back to sleep consumed with intellectual curiosity; "I wonder if my baby will go to heaven if she dies?" She is afraid. Many moms and dads have had anxious hearts wondering, "Will the SIDS demon visit our home tonight?" I remember waking up at night in those first few weeks after bringing a boy home, peering over the edge of the bassinet, asking myself "Still breathing?... yep, still breathing." And off to sleep I go. Fear causes us to wonder, "Do babies go to heaven when they die?"

So does grief. Some of you have lost babies. You're a mommy, a dad; you're a grandparent or a sibling of a baby who died. Maybe through stillbirth or miscarriage. Or maybe someone didn't see the toddler behind the van when she was backing up. What tragedy. And we're haunted, right? We're haunted wondering, "Did my baby feel pain? Was he scared?" And the thought that our beautiful babies are in the comforting arms of Jesus is one of the only things that brings us peace.

If you fit into one of these categories, fearful or hurting, God has grace for you today. That grace isn't merely found in *answers*. I'm hoping to point you in a faithful direction today to get some help with our question. But God has grace even if we don't have all of our questions answered with certainty. He promises comfort and care. He promises he'll never leave you or forsake you. He's given you a family in Christ to walk with you in your journey. His greatest gift, Jesus, lives inside of you by the power of his Holy Spirit.

This question doesn't even make sense to an unbelieving world. Of course babies go to heaven when they die; all people go to heaven when they die! Nobody goes to... hell! We're all good people - some say. God's righteous judgment on sinners is largely ignored in our world; and it's even ignored in some churches by some pastors; they refuse to teach that God punishes sinners (some don't believe it). I'm not one of those pastors; this is not one of those churches. We believe God's word. And God's word is clear: God's righteous judgment has been revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of humanity. And God has fixed a day in which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed (Jesus Christ) and of this he has given assurance to all by raising Jesus Christ from the dead. The good news worth singing about is that God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love

for which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ when we call on the name of Jesus to be saved. Good news, FBC.

This question (Do babies go to heaven when they die?) is difficult and challenging *because* we believe the Bible. Here's why our conviction itself in the scriptures makes this question challenging.

First of all, the Bible doesn't answer this question clearly. You will not find a chapter, a verse or a section that says, "Yes, babies go to heaven when they die" or "No, they don't." There's no glossary in the back of your Bibles or a table of contents that points us to an obvious answer. That can be a tad frustrating.

But this isn't all uncommon. The Bible doesn't say what movies you can go to. It doesn't say how many drinks are too many. It doesn't say if your house is too big or if you own too many cars. The Bible doesn't say how much scripture you should read or how long you should pray. Now, there are answers to those questions. There are some movies that you shouldn't watch and gluttony and drunkenness are sins. Storing up riches on earth is condemned by Jesus and scripture reading and prayer are necessary for our walk with Christ. So, how do we find the answers?

Do you see how important it is, my brothers and sisters, to know your God and his way through the scriptures? The scriptures are where you find the answers when there are not answers (do you know what I mean by that?) And friends, you will not find that direction in an "Our Daily Bread" kind of way. I use that reference to the favorite devotional to so many (Our Daily Bread) to illustrate that while such a short, concise devotional may provide a quick word of encouragement as you begin your day, spending such little time in the scriptures leaves you scratching your head with the very important questions in life like ours today. You know God by knowing Jesus Christ and his story; and you know the story of Christ in the story of scripture. You need to see God in the story of the Exodus, in the story of the formation and fall of Israel, in the story of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, in the story of God's Revelation, in the story of the Apostles spreading the good news of Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit. You don't get that in one fortune cookie-sized verse with an inspiring anecdote to go with it. You get that when you go to the book. Know God, my brothers and sisters, by reading and knowing the book.

The second reason why this is a challenging question to answer is because God's word labels all people (including infants) as sinners by nature. David's famous confession in Ps. 51 makes that clear when he says (vs. 5), "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me." Notice how he takes it back to his infancy; even before his infancy. To his conception. That's how long he's been a sinner. So, if a baby is a sinner at conception, if a baby is by nature a child of wrath (as Eph. 2 says sinners are) then it doesn't sound like their eternal destiny is going to be very pleasant.

It's my belief from the scriptures (and we're going to get there in a moment) that while the Bible doesn't answer this question explicitly and even though babies are born in sin like David said, I do believe they receive the saving mercy and grace of God and enjoy God's presence forever and not God's judgment. I can't say "I know this with certainty," but there are good biblical reasons for believing it to be so. When the Bible isn't explicitly clear on an issue, it is right to hold our beliefs a little more loosely, with not so much conviction or certainty. So, for example, I'm more confident in my beliefs about the atoning death of Jesus and his victorious resurrection than I am about my belief on a baby's destiny. Why? Because the Bible is really clear on one (the death and resurrection of Jesus) and not as clear on the other. That's how we should always approach such things.

There are a few scriptural references that some believe teach in a baby's salvation. For example, when David's infant son dies in in 2 Sam 12, David says (vs. 23), "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." So, here's a reference to David saying that someday, presumably when he dies, he will go to his son. Where will that be? Heaven, maybe? I'm not sure. The ancient Jews believed that when you die you go to Sheol, which means, "the place of the dead." That wasn't a happy place. The hope of a faithful Israelite was that God would not leave them in Sheol, but instead would give them new life, a resurrected life. So, it's not so clear what David meant by this.

Another passage people use to suggest babies and children to go heaven when they die is Jesus' commendation of them in Mark 10. In vs. 14 Jesus says, "Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God." That's who the kingdom belongs to; to people like children. That's who gets the kingdom. Again, this passage is worth consideration; the kingdom belongs to such as these. The challenge with this verse is trying to discern exactly how far Jesus meant for us to apply this passage. He said what he said because he wanted people to take the posture of humility and dependence like those children were. Does he mean to say all those children are saved? I don't know.

I actually think the strongest biblical case for babies receiving mercy if they die is made when you actually look at the gospel story and way itself. Romans 1 is the place to go so turn to Romans 1. In vs. 16-17, Paul gives a very brief summary of the gospel. The gospel, God's story and work of salvation, is the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes. How so? Because in the gospel you find and experience the righteousness of God from faith for faith. What Paul does next is very important: he confines and describes humanity as unrighteous. Look at vs. 18 (READ). That's the big problem, friends, for all of humanity. God and his gospel are righteous; you and I are unrighteous. And because of this unrighteousness vs. 18 says that the wrath of God is revealed from heaven. And being unrighteous, human being suppress the truth about God.

But already we are at the key spot concerning our question. Read with me vs. 19-20 (READ). The very end there in vs. 20 says that human beings are without excuse. When we stand before God we will have nothing to say; we will have no excuse. Have you ever had no

excuse? We usually have excuses. We're so good at blaming or rationalizing that it's quite common to be caught red handed and still offer excuses. "Well, if it wasn't for my brother, I never would have been here in the first place. You don't understand, she stole from me first." When you truly have no excuse you just keep quiet, don't you? You have nowhere to go, nothing to say. Just, "Yep, I messed up. I have no excuse. I'm sorry." God is looking to eliminate every excuse people might have.

But why does Paul say humans have no excuse? It's because humans can perceive the eternal power and divine nature in the things that God has made. Paul says truth about God, the truth about his eternal power and his divine nature, are clearly perceived. The heavens and the earth, God's creation, herald, proclaim, shout the glory, power and nature of God. But, as Paul's argument goes in this section, humans suppress what we see and know in unrighteousness deluding and deceiving ourselves in the process. We are guilty, we have no excuse because we perceive the truth about God in creation, but we suppress it.

But what if we do? What if we do have an excuse? We don't... you and I here this morning mature enough, developed enough and capable enough to see God's creation and recognize it's beauty. We are thinking, rational beings with the capacity to understand. We have the capacity to take in God's creation, analyze it and make conclusions. But not everyone does.

Some mentally disabled individuals don't have this capacity. Korby and I have a pastor-couple who we've gotten to know over the years and have become friends with. Several years ago one of their children died. He was mentally disabled. While he was well into his adult years (40+ years old) he had the mental capacity of an infant. He lived his entire life in diapers because he could never even learn how to control his bodily functions. He was institutionalized his entire life and completely dependent on others. I would argue that this man lacked the ability to perceive the easiest and most basic truths.

Babies are like that. Even though scientific research and investigation supports this, you just need to spend some time with babies and toddlers to learn rather quickly what their mental capacities are. And while it's absolutely stunning to see how fast babies and children learn and grow, it's also easy to see that babies, young children do not possess the capacity to see God in nature, to rightly process their accountability to him as the Creator of the Heavens and the Earth. Babies, the mentally challenged, young children truly do not and can not perceive. And if they can not perceive that would give them an excuse.

Did you know the Bible describes God as having particular mercy for the ignorant? To be ignorant is to not know. I'm completely ignorant about the best ways to make a quilt; I have no clue on how to do that. Paul says this in Acts 17:29-30 (READ). The Athenians were ignorant about the One True God as were countless others before them. And Paul says that God overlooked ignorance for a time. When was that time? And what does this "overlooking" mean? I'm not so sure about the details, but Paul's point is pretty clear to me. He's saying, "Athenians, you're not ignorant anymore. So turn and repent! A day is coming when God will judge the

world. He overlooked your ignorance and the ignorance of others for a time (praise God that he did; that's his mercy). But he won't anymore now that you have heard about Jesus."

That lack of awareness, lack of knowledge, lack of perception is probably best applied to the cognitively incapable. Infants, babies, toddlers, the mentally disabled. Would it not be the case, then, that God would have a particular mercy and grace for them? It seems that way to me. With a God who does not delight in the death of the wicked, with a God who shows mercy because of ignorance, with a God who desires all men to be saved, with a God whose grace grows more and more where sin grows more and more so that the power of grace is stronger than the power of sin, I believe then that God has a particular mercy for infants, for small children, for others with cognitive issues.

Now, there's still all kinds of questions, right? Well, how old? When does a child cross the line of ignorance to accountability? I'm not sure. I'm going to trust God's mercy with more of these unknowns and appeal to everyone who can understand to repent of sin and turn to Jesus. But one thing, I think, I can say with a high level of confidence is that if these things are true (a baby going to heaven at death), it's due to God's grace and mercy and not some work of righteousness on our part. Do you know what I mean by that? God accepting babies in heaven is all grace and mercy. That if and when we see that day we will sing the praises of God's grace all the more and not say, "Wow, I'm so glad I had my baby dedicated at church. I knew baptizing my baby was going to pay off." Those examples are works of righteousness; thinking that God somehow saves and rescues because we did something right. Does God relate to us that way? Do you ever see in the scriptures God giving mercy and grace based on the works of men? Never. That's what grace and mercy mean; it's a gift. It's undeserved. You didn't and couldn't work for it. God just gives mercy and grace.

Think and pray over these things; see if God is persuading you to believe what I'm saying scripture implies. Remember, I don't hold this belief as firmly as I do others. But I do cling to and rejoice in God's inexpressible mercy and because of that I'm believing he graciously and lovingly applies that to babies of every race, in every country, regardless of family background or circumstances.

Questions for the week

- What's harder to process and manage for you: the emotions that this question provokes or processing the complexities of the question? How come?
- How important is it to know the wisdom of God's gospel to answer this question and others like it? How so?
- How would you help a person think about this question if you're asked in 6 weeks "Do babies go to heaven when they die?" What would you say? Why?