

COMMON QUESTION NO. 20

WHAT HAPPENS TO CHILDREN WHO DIE IN INFANCY?

This is a very emotional question. Parents have brought a child into the world who starts life as completely helpless. Then it dies. We want to know what happens to the child. Does it go to heaven, or to hell, or to some other place? This also applies to babies that die in the womb before birth.

We need to think about this very soberly, step by step. So we start with two questions.

1. Do infants need to be saved?

Generally we look on a new born baby and think of it as like a little angel, innocent. But is it really true that they are innocent? We can ask why it is that as they grow they disobey, they lie, they fight. We do not teach them to do these things, in fact we generally forbid them. Further, if death is the wages of sin (Romans 6:23), then why do babies die? It is because they are sinners and so need to be saved from sin. Our 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith teaches that this is because, "The family of man is rooted in the first pair. As Adam and Eve stood in the room and stead of all mankind, the guilt of their sin was reckoned by God's appointment to the account of all their posterity, who also from birth derived from them a polluted nature" (6/3). What is the Biblical teaching?

(1) Romans 5:12-21. The whole human race was represented by Adam. When he fell, we fell in him. His condemnation resulted in the condemnation of all (verses 16,18). The guilt of his one sin, his disobedience, is imputed to us all. In the same way, all who are represented by Christ are justified on the basis of His righteousness, His obedience (verse 18). Christ's righteousness is imputed to the believer (2 Corinthians 5:21, Philippians 3:9). Let us not cry 'Unfair!' It is the way God has ordered His creation, both in responsibility to obey and in redemption from disobedience.

(2) Ephesians 2:3. "By nature" we are all children of wrath. As we are all formed in the womb we are all liable to the wrath of God, even those tiny helpless infants (see Psalm 58:3). We inherit a sinful nature through our first parents.

(3) Psalm 51:5. David confesses, "I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me." He is not excusing his sin by blaming it on his parents, nor saying that the act of procreation is sinful. Rather he is admitting that his problem is deeper than the acts of sin he has committed. The problem is his nature, his innermost being, his heart (see Jesus's teaching in Matthew 12:33-35, 15:18-20, also Jeremiah 17:9).

Therefore, infants need to be saved from both the guilt of sin by justification, and the pollution of sin by the new birth, just as any other person in this world.

2. How can they be saved if they cannot believe in Christ?

The 1689 Confession has a section on infants, and included are others who also cannot hear the gospel and respond to it in faith, e.g. those with no mental capacity. "Elect infants dying in infancy are regenerated and saved by Christ through the Spirit, who works when and where and how He pleases. The same is true of all elect persons who are incapable of being outwardly called through the preaching of the gospel" (10/3). This is the difficult question: 'If salvation is through faith in Jesus Christ, how is it possible for anyone to be saved without that faith?' Here we have those who are physically incapable of believing. Is there any evidence of God's saving work in such? Yes. There is John the Baptist. In his mother's

womb he “leaped for joy” when Jesus’ mother Mary greeted his mother Elizabeth. He was to be filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother’s womb (Luke 1:15,44).

We need to be very clear about the role of faith. Faith is **not** a work that God rewards with salvation. Justification is on the basis of Christ’s righteousness, and regeneration is the sovereign work of the Spirit. Faith is the means by which such blessings are received. But what is faith? Faith is ceasing to trust yourself, and putting all your trust in Jesus Christ to do for you what you cannot do for yourself. Faith is required because it removes all possibility of boasting (Romans 3:27). But infants have no danger of boasting, as they can neither put faith in themselves nor in another! In their case, if any infants are saved, it is because of the work of Christ and the Holy Spirit.

3. Salvation is only possible on the basis of election

As regards the Confession it is obvious that this question was important 350 years ago. Infant mortality was much higher then, with more than 1 in 10 dying before their first birthday. There have been different views of infant salvation:

- All infants are saved. (i) Such think that David had the assurance that his dead infant was in heaven (2 Samuel 12:23). It is not sure that this is the reason why he stopped weeping once the child died. He probably means that there is no bringing the baby back; rather he is the one who will also die. The nature of life after death was not so clear in the Old Testament as it is with us. (ii) Jesus’ attitude towards children, as in Matthew 19:13-15.
- All infants who are baptized are saved. This can only be true if you believe in baptismal regeneration, which is unBiblical.
- Elect infants are saved. The Confession simply refers to those who are ‘elect’ without specifying whether this is all, many or few. I think we honestly have to admit that the Bible is silent on the subject. We know the Lord is both just and gracious and will do what is right (so Genesis 18:25). We can leave it to the Lord. What must concern us is those who are capable “being outwardly called through the preaching of the gospel”. If they do not respond they will certainly not be saved.

Election is the basis for any hope of salvation for infants, as it is for any sinner. Yes, **election**! We are saved only because of the election of the Father, the redemption of the Son, and the work of the Holy Spirit. So those infants who are saved are saved by God’s work for them and in them. Those who believe that the sinner must use his supposed free-will to decide to accept Jesus and who say that election is on the basis of God’s foreknowledge that he will decide to believe, can have no hope for infants or any incapable of faith. This is why some have said that there must be an opportunity after death, just as Catholics have invented a *limbus infantum*, a place where infants supposedly go after death.

The three major Confessions of the seventeenth century, the Presbyterian Westminster Confession (1647), the Congregationalist-Independent Savoy Confession (1658), and the Baptist Confession 1689, all have almost the same wording.

What is the message for those who lose an infant? It is the same for those who grow up into maturity. There is no absolute guarantee from God that they will be saved. From conception we earnestly pray for our children that God will be gracious, and then we leave it to Him.