

## What is the eternal destiny of an infant who dies?

In our experience with the [Christian Answers Network](#), one of the most frequently asked questions concerns the death and eternal state of infants, children and those who are not mentally capable of accepting Jesus Christ as their savior. This question is charged with emotion and has been debated since the early Church fathers. Unfortunately, the Scriptures do not directly and explicitly address this topic. It would be presumptuous, therefore, to suggest that we have written the final and authoritative answer to this important question. Nevertheless, the following considerations may help to bring some light to a confusing issue.

1. In one of the darkest moments of the Psalmist's life, the death of his son, [David](#) makes a proclamation which many feel reveals the eternal state of an infant. [2 Sam. 12:23](#) states,

"But now he has died; why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me."

Was David teaching that he would be reunited with his son in heaven, or that death was inevitable for all human life? Most biblical scholars believe that the context of this verse indicates that David was probably acknowledging the inevitability of death and thus this verse adds little to our understanding of the eternal state of infants. If one chooses to believe, however, that David was hopeful of spending eternity with his son, we must ask if his hope is an explicit declaration of biblical truth.

Even if David had, in a time of great grief, expressed hope of being with his deceased child, this should not be viewed as a theological promise for the salvation of infants. David, although a man after God's heart, was not infallible and many of the things he said that thought were not in accord with truth.

For example, read any of David's imprecatory Psalms; [7](#), [35](#), [55](#), [58](#), [59](#), [69](#), [79](#), [109](#), [137](#), [139](#). Although the Bible faithfully records David's feeling and his call to God to bring righteous judgment, few would argue that these words represent the consistent promise of God's judgment toward sinners.

2. We cannot simply assume that children are "innocent" and are therefore exempt from the penalties of sin. The Bible teaches clearly that infants are in a state of sin and need to be regenerated. They, like all humanity, can be saved only through Christ. ([Ps. 51:5](#) "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me." [John 3:6](#) "That which is born of the flesh is flesh." [Rom. 5:14](#) "Nevertheless death reigned from Adam until Moses, even over them that had not sinned after the likeness of Adam's transgression.") In [Matthew 19:14](#), Jesus warned against forbidding children to come to Him. This account testifies that children, just as adults, need to come to Christ.
  
3. At the same time that Jesus implied the children's need to come to Him, He praised children for their innocent faith; "for such is the kingdom of heaven." While this is most probably an endorsement of healthy character and attitudes, it is also an approval of children in general. Jesus' teachings concerning children show the highest love and respect ([Matt. 18:1-6](#)).
  
4. While Christ's endorsement of childlike character is not a denial of sin nature, the Bible does seem to teach that compared to the sins of adults, infants and children possess a "relative innocence." ([Deut. 1:39](#), [Jonah 4:11](#), [Rom. 9:11](#))
  
5. To reconcile the truths that all humans are sinful but that children do possess a kind of "relative innocence", some theologians have suggested that the distinct variations in sin could carry different kinds of "death penalties."

For instance, could it be proposed that the penalty for inherited sin (sin passed genetically from generation to generation) is spiritual death (separation from God) which state, if left unchanged and confirmed in personal sin (sins personally committed as an act of free will) results in [eternal death](#) and eternal separation from God? Could the penalty of imputed sin (Judicially passed from Adam directly to each individual - [Rom. 5:12f](#)) be physical death?

Category of Sin	Temporal Penalty for Sin	Ultimate Penalty
Inherited Sin (from generation to generation)	Spiritual death (separation from God)	If not reconciled, results in eternal death (eternal separation from God)
Imputed Sin (Judicially from Adam to each individual)	Physical death	none
Personal Sin (act of willful disobedience)	Results in broken relationship with God for Christians, requiring confession of sins (I John 1:9)	Confirms inherited Sin in unbeliever - resulting in eternal death.

If so, it could help us to understand how a child (born in sin, yet having not committed sin as an act of the will) could be subject to physical death without being subject to the penalty of eternal spiritual death. Infants, born "guilty" of both imputed sin (ultimately resulting in physical death) and inherited sin, would not be subject to the eternal penalties of sin until confirmed by personal acts of unrighteousness committed with an understanding of right and wrong. It must be confessed that the Scriptures do not explicitly teach the existence of these distinctions. The Bible does, however, allow for this possibility.

6. The condition of salvation for adults is personal faith. Infants are incapable of fulfilling this condition. For this reason, many have suggested that there is an age of accountability. By this, it is understood that at a certain time in a person's life he/she becomes aware of personal responsibility for wrong actions.

This is not simply a recognition of cause and effects, but of personal accountability and responsibility. This "age of accountability" would probably be different for every individual. In deed, some who are mentally handicapped may never become aware of their own struggle against unrighteousness.

Again, this concept is not explicitly mentioned in the scriptures, but seems to be an accepted part of early Jewish custom. It has been suggested that one of the reasons that the apostles do not directly address the subject of infant mortality is because it was understood in their culture that a person was not responsible to God/to covenant until maturity, approximately 12 to 13 years of age.

If in some sense there is an age of accountability, it seems that provision is made for the infant's reception of Christ in some other way. There is a possibility that infants are objects of special grace for which normal rules don't apply. In this case, we would appeal for salvation based upon God's love and compassion for those who are incapable of making decisions about their eternal destiny.

7. Some would argue that the salvation of an infant is not so much related to the child's righteousness as it is to the righteousness of God. Based upon the gracious character of our God, we would argue that God would not condemn an infant to eternal punishment.

In Genesis 18, Abraham talked with God about the impending destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. During his intercession, Abraham appeals to God's righteousness, "Will not the Judge of all the earth do right? (vs. 25)" To Abraham, it was an impossibility that God would send destruction and wrath upon those who did not deserve it. He challenged God that a righteous Judge would certainly do right. In response, God promised to acknowledge the existence of those who were righteous and not to destroy the cities if even ten could be found who had not conformed to wickedness. Unfortunately, ten faithful people could not be found.

Even then, however, God proved his righteousness by saving Lot and his daughters from destruction.

## **Conclusion**

Through the ages, this question of infant salvation has been emotionally debated. The persistence of this debate has been aided by the fact that the writers of Scripture did not explicitly comment on this subject. Having reviewed many pertinent avenues of reason, we can safely say that the salvation of infants can be regarded as at least an uncontradicted hope. It is my conviction, however, that although infant salvation is not taught explicitly, based upon the justice and character of God, infant salvation is an implicit certainty. In humility we worship a righteous God who will certainly do right!

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