

Infant salvation: what happens to infants when they die?



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The topic of infant salvation is sadly one that many are faced to wrestle with in their lives. Whether those expecting a baby lose it in the womb or a child is lost before he or she has the competence to make his or her own decisions, parents are left helplessly wondering if they'll get a chance to see them again in heaven. The topic has intrigued, tormented, and divided the church for many years and theologians and pastors have wrestled with it in hopes of giving answers to suffering parents. Terrence Tiessen has dedicated chapter 10 in his book *Who Can Be Saved?* to which he titles "Can Infants Be Saved?" It is here where he wrestles with this topic and attempts to be fulfilled and find truth in his conclusions. From this book I will be responding and wrestling with my own thoughts, ideas, as well as further research on the difficult but important topic: "What happens to infants when they die?"

As Tiessen acknowledges as well, I believe that it is safe to say that most can agree that young children and the unborn are indeed unevangelized. After all, as far as human knowledge goes there is no possible way for said children to comprehend the gospel at such a young age. In spite of this, Tiessen assures us that "they, too, need to be saved (and) no one gets to enjoy God's fellowship in heaven except through the Son of God." [1] Understandably, this leads parents to ask the question of whether or not their children are automatically saved by God's grace. This would mean that the children would not have to independently believe, accept, and proclaim Jesus as their Lord and Saviour, certainly an important principle of Christianity (that justification is by faith). As Alan Hamilton puts it: "it may be safe to say that the majority of Christian people today believe that the

infant who dies is taken to safety and bliss in heaven, but relatively few of these people could give a clear reason for their hope.”[2]

An important aspect of this subject, as Tiessen makes note of, is the idea of infant election. I believe that God is able to know the hearts of those too young for us to understand. As we were all born sinners through the fall of man, the same would apply to infants and the unborn. I strongly believe that through Jesus we are all saved from the sins of man but only through faith and acceptance of this principle can we be with Him in heaven. Yilun Cai discusses the Catholic doctrine his article titled “ *Robert Bellarmine’s Idea of the Child Who Dies Unbaptized in the Commentary on the Summa Theologiae.*” Interestingly, as Cai points out, the Catholic doctrine states that children who die unbaptized are contaminated by original sin and this sin can only be taken away in baptism. Therefore, the doctrine states that unbaptized children go to a place called limbo – the temporary place or state of those who died before the birth of Jesus.[3]In the article “ *Limbo: A Theological Evaluation,*” George J. Dyer adds to this by mentioning that “ the fate of an unbaptized child is closely tied to several highly volatile questions: original sin, the necessity of baptism, the salvific will of God. Each of these issues is a vital nerve in the body of Catholic doctrine, and each can be studied with clinical precision in the person of an unbaptized child.”[4]Understandably, this conclusion is not very comforting. I can’t help but feel a sense of unease in thinking infants and the unborn do not have the chance to wrestle with their faith and make their own decisions and wonder if there is any mention of this in Scripture. Tiessen offers assistance in this. After wrestling with many different thoughts and ideas about different

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doctrines and confessions, Tiessen concludes his own personal opinion on the matter. Tiessen makes the claim that he believes Scripture leaves us ignorant as to how many of those who die in infancy are elect, though we may be hopeful of the greatness of God's mercy. He explains that although it would certainly be nice to assume that all who die in infancy are saved, he concurs that many of the texts to which people allude "really do not seem to bear sufficiently upon the issue to be of help." [5] In particular, Tiessen points out two texts in Scripture that are most frequently cited as evidence of the salvation of infants. The first is David's statement that his dead child would not return to David but that David would "go to him" (2 Sam 12: 33), which is interpreted as an indication that David expected to be together with his child in heaven. The other, which is the first that came to my mind, comes when Jesus is talking about children to his disciples and says "it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs" (Mt 19: 14; cf. Mk 10: 14; Lk 18: 16-17). Since this is such a popular verse for this topic, I feel it is important to integrate other's thoughts and research on this passage as well. Francis A. Sullivan states in his article "*The Development of Doctrine About Infants Who Die Unbaptized*" that this passage proves two things: "the sincere will of God for the salvation of every human person, and the tender love of God for little children." Sullivan concludes that "anyone who seriously meditated on these two truths and applied them to God's providence for infants who die unbaptized, could well become convinced that God in his loving mercy does for those infants what the sacrament would have done, so that nothing can hinder them from coming to him and living with him forever." [6] On the contrary, Tiessen believes that David could have been saying no more than that he too would die, that nothing could be done to raise his son. Tiessen <https://assignbuster.com/infant-salvation-what-happens-to-infants-when-they-die/>

states that “ apart from the fact that the children to whom Jesus referred may well have been walking, we read too much into the text if we assume that Jesus was making a profound theological statement about the salvation of infants.”[7]With this in mind, Tiessen also claims that through scripture we cannot be definite about the situation of any individual as the Bible is silent concerning the election of infants who die. I can’t help but agree with what Tiessen is saying here as he goes on to say that “ if any of them are graciously saved by God...I am certain that they were guilty sinners who will be saved only because Christ died for them; they were “ in Christ,” and they will be saved because they eventually trust in in Christ, through God’s gracious gift of faith.”[8]Personally, I strongly believe that Jesus does in fact love children as is mentioned in Scripture. It is very difficult, however, to connect these passages with the specific idea of infant salvation. I have a hard time finding evidence that Jesus has ever been recorded as talking specifically about infant salvation at all in the Bible. I strongly agree with Tiessen when he reminds us that we must leave this matter in the hands of God and that Scripture “ witnesses to universal human solidarity with Adam in sin, but consistently identifies our actions in this life as the ground of final condemnation.”[9]

B. B. Warfield, a Princeton Theologian who wrote “ *Two Studies in the History of Doctrine*,” [10]is cited by many in their research of this topic. For example, I turned to the article “ *Warfield, Infant Salvation, and The Logic of Calvinism*,” where David K. Clark addresses Warfield’s position on the fate of those who die in infancy and helps to summarize and better understand Warfield’s writing. Clark says that Warfield essentially believes that “ God,

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entirely by grace, chooses those who will be saved. Thus infants who are elected by God will be saved.”[11]This reassures the importance and difficulty of the topic of infant election. Clark explains that Warfield concludes that the application of salvation depends on a decisive action of the individual. While I agree with this statement, one cannot help but acknowledge the fact that infants simply do not have the mental capacity necessary to take this decisive step. This still doesn't provide much help to answer the deep debate of perhaps an exception for those unable to do so. While Warfield doesn't elaborate on this, Clark digs deeper himself. Clark mentions that “ later Wesleyan/Arminian advocates that...since infants cannot be held accountable for their predicament because of their inability to act so as to choose him, God graciously acts to save all infants who die.”[12]Clark says

age is a factor in the human person. But the inner logic of Warfield's position requires that no factor in the human person can be the basis of choosing. The choice must be based only in God's will. Thus God's choices are still arbitrary considering the choice to be made, for all relevant reasons for the different behavior are precluded by the inner logic of Warfield's Reformed system. The position that all infants who die are saved and only some adults are saved can be held, given the gracious view, only by conceding that God's decisions are based on arbitrary grounds.[13]

Both Clark and Tiessen emphasize the importance of personal faith. While Tiessen also attempts to understand this aspect, he states something that really stood out to me. Tiessen says that “ we cannot assume that people (infants or adults) are unable to communicate with God simply because they

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are unable to communicate with us.”[14]Connecting this to my previous question that infants and the unborn may not be saved because of their mental inability to decide whether or not to choose faith, Tiessen reminds us that there is no way of knowing if this is in fact true. He even goes so far as to say that he believes “ God reveals himself to infants (and the unborn) during their brief lives, and that their salvation can, therefore, take place before death, but that it does not occur without an act of personal faith.”[15]This is something I am comfortable agreeing with as it reassures the idea of an all-powerful, all-knowing God. I strongly believe that God knows the hearts and intentions of all He has created. This leads back to the importance of personal faith in these beliefs. However, I can state with confidence that I truly have reason to believe that only God can know each and everyone one of us personally and He truly does save those who reveal themselves as true believers of His word in whatever way that may be.

In conclusion, Tiessen explains that people meet Jesus at the moment of death and that their response to him will be consistent with their previous response to God by whatever means God has made himself known to them. He concludes that beyond death, all who come into fellowship with the Father will do so through the knowledge of the Son. On the contrary, those who live beyond death outside fellowship with God will not only have rejected God’s various overtures during their lives but will have rejected Christ at the moment of that final personal meeting. Tiessen explains how decisions in this life are decisive. The elect of all nations will be brought to saving faith within their lifetimes. Some of us will have been graced with more knowledge of God than have others, but all of us will have much more

to anticipate.[16]Tiessen ends the chapter with these words: “ Frequently, when stating that everyone receives the revelation they need to be saved by grace through faith, I have observed that, because of the sinfulness of humankind after the Fall, no one can believe without the Spirit’s enablement.”[17]While it is difficult to find Scripture passages that mention the specific idea of infant salvation, we can use our knowledge of God’s ways as well as interact with the thoughts and research of past deep thinkers in order to attempt to try and find comfort in our conclusions.

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[2]Alan Hamilton, " The Doctrine of Infant Salvation," *Department of Hermeneutics and Apologetics* 101, no. 404 (Oct-Dec 1944): 324.

[3]Yilan Cai, " Robert Bellarmine's Idea of the Child Who Dies Unbaptized in the Commentary on the Summa Theologiae," *Journal of Early Modern Christianity* 1, no. 1 (2014): 143.

[4]George J. Dyer, " Limbo: A Theological Evaluation," *Theological Studies* 19, no. 1 (March 1958): 32.

[5]Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved?* 208-213.

[6]Francis A. Sullivan, " The Development of Doctrine About Infants Who Die Unbaptized," *Theological Studies* 72, no. 1 (March 2011): 14.

[7]Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved?* (212).

[8]Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved?* (213).

[9]Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved?* (213).

[10]B. B. Warfield, *Two Studies in the History of Doctrine* (New York: Christian Literature Co., 1897).

[11]David K. Clark, " Warfield, Infant Salvation, and The Logic of Calvinism," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 27, no. 4 (Dec 1984): 459.

[12]Clark, " Warfield," 459.

[13]Clark, " Warfield," 462.

[14]Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved?* (215).

[15]Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved?* (216).

[16]Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved?* (228-229).

[17]Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved?* (229).