

**What is the destiny of those who die as infants, children, or mentally incapable having
never had the chance to hear and understand the Gospel?**

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06 December 2011

When a baby or a child who is morally incapable dies, do they go to heaven or hell? Do parents of these little ones have any hope of seeing them again? What hope can scripture offer to the grieving family, or is it silent on the subject? The problem that one will find when researching this topic within the Word of God, is that there seems to be no definitive answer. Not only does scripture seem to be silent on the topic, regarding infants, children, and the mentally incapable; but within Evangelicalism there is much debate over their destiny in eternity. Based upon scriptural evidence and theological explanation, this paper intends to prove that all infants, children incapable of moral responsibility, and the mentally incapable are a part of God's Elect and will, after death, spend their eternal lives with the Trinity.

Exegetical Analysis:

A good place to start this discussion is in Rom 5:12-21. In this passage the Bible reveals the “transmission of sin found through Adam” and the “transmission of justification found in and through Christ.” The backdrop of this passage declares that God made peace with His enemies (the human race) by dying for them, even though they would have always chosen to be His enemies. However, this peace was not applied to all, hence the final part of verse 1: “...we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”¹ This relationship, a father to his child, is the context of verses 12-21 in chapter five. Hoekema says regarding the context: “(the author’s intent was to) unfold the amazing benefits we receive through Christ and thus to glorify the abounding grace of God toward sinful humanity.”² This passage is important to the conversation

¹ Romans 5:1b, English Standard Version (ESV)

² Hoekema, Anthony A. Created In God's Image. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994. Pg. 162.

because it establishes the sinful nature of mankind and the gracious nature of God. Verses 12-14, basically show the correlation between the first man's sin and the sinful nature of mankind. The confusing part about this passage is the final phrase, "because all sinned"; many take this as speaking to "actual sin" or the sin committed after birth.³ Hoekema says that instead of referring to actual sin here, Paul is referring to "original sin" and its transmission of condemnation to the human race.⁴ Paul explains what is meant by the phrase as he explains that those who do not receive commandments are still deserving of death because of their sin nature; this is extremely important when trying to understand the imputation of Adam's sin. Although those who lived between Adam and Moses were not held accountable for breaking the Mosaic law, it is imperative to know that they were still potentially lawbreakers: 1) breaking the law written on their hearts⁵ or 2) the individual commands from God.⁶ So, the objection is easily raised: why then does Paul say that all mankind are condemned based on Adam's act? John Piper says it well: "...yes people broke those laws, and yes one could argue that these sins are the root cause of death and condemnation in the world. But, he (Paul) says, there is a problem with that view, because death reigned 'even over those who had not sinned in the likeness of offense of Adam.' There are those who died without seeing or knowing any divine law and choosing to sin against it."⁷ Piper concludes that those Paul is referring to are infants and the current author would also

³ Hoekema. Created In God's Image. Pg. 163

⁴ Ibid. pg. 164-65

⁵ Rom 2:15

⁶ Genesis 6:13-14; 8:16-17; 17:10; 20:7; 31:13

⁷ Piper, John. Counted Righteous In Christ: Should we abandon the imputation of Christ's Righteousness. Wheaton: Crossway Books & Desiring God Foundation. 2002. Pg. 95.

add the mentally incapable and children incapable of moral responsibility. In verses 15-21, Paul compares the disobedience of Adam and obedience of Christ and the ramifications their acts had on the human race. He says that through one man's (Adam) disobedience mankind "was placed in the position of sinners" and through one man's (Christ) obedience man "was placed in the position of the righteous ones."⁸ This statement in verse 18 must be taken into account with verses 15-17 and their comparison between the "free gift and trespass." For in Adam, mankind found condemnation, but in Christ mankind can receive a free gift. According to verse 17, the free gift is not justification, but righteousness which brings about justification. It is imperative to distinguish here, that all mankind receive a sin nature, but not all human beings are given the free gift of righteousness because of God's abundant grace.⁹ In verses 20-21 Paul concludes his thoughts by stating the purpose of law was to show how terrible the trespass was, and to further flesh it out for all human beings. However, as sin increased because of this, grace "abounded all the more".¹⁰ Again, he shows the consequences of sin and the result of Christ's death: human beings find death in sin, but justification through the righteousness provided in Christ!

Eph 2:1-3 and Rom 1:18-3:20 both establish the sinful position of all human beings who have been born or will be born. In Eph 2 Paul describes all human beings as: basically incapable of anything but sin. In fact by nature they are inclined towards sin and away from God. This establishes the distance between God and mankind, which in turn gives the reader an awe of a

⁸ Ibid. pg. 165-66. Hoekema is using the "Revised Berkley Version" here to quote verse 19.

⁹ Piper, John. Counted Righteous In Christ: Should we abandon the imputation of Christ's Righteousness. Pg. 104.

¹⁰ ESV, Rom. 5:20

salvation that is available by grace through faith¹¹. In Rom 1:18-3:20, Paul also gives evidence that no one can escape responsibility for their own sin and nature¹², even though they may be seeking morality or other religions; they cannot save themselves. Walvoord and Zuck say this in regards to this section of scripture: “The human race stands condemned before God and is helpless and hopeless apart from God’s grace.”¹³

There is no hope outside of the grace of God and so one must ask: what must someone do to receive God’s grace? The Bible is very clear that there is nothing anyone can do to deserve or receive God’s grace. In the passages previously listed, the human condition makes any movement toward God as futile and in effect impossible; for the human condition is equal to that of a corpse.¹⁴ It is important to reiterate what Rom 5:12-21 says: that Adam’s curse is applied to all human kind no matter how old they are or what era they have lived in, but Christ’s free gift of righteousness which brings about justification is only available to those whom have received God’s abundant grace. A couple of other passages are worth mentioning here: Eph 1:3-14, Rom 8:29-31, and Rom 9:14-18. The list is by no means exhaustive, but will be sufficient for the topic at hand. In Eph 1:3-14 Paul lays out the plan of God’s redemption very clearly. Just like Creation, all three Persons of the Trinity played a part in this plan: The Father ordained it; The

¹¹ Eph. 2:8

¹² Paul in Romans 1:18-21 makes the case that even those who have never heard of the Gospel are still culpable for their sin and will pay the penalty of death and hell at the judgment.

¹³ The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament Edition. Editors: John H. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck. Commentary on Romans by John A. Witmer. Colorado Springs: Cook Communications. 2000. Pg. 441

¹⁴ Rom 1:18-3:20, 5:12-21, & Eph 2:1-3 it would be good to highlight Paul’s quotation of Ps. 14:1-3: “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.” (Rom. 3:10-13)

Son carried it out; and The Spirit calls and guarantees the plan. The elect here are “chosen before the foundation of the World... as adopted sons and daughters through Jesus Christ according to the purpose of His will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved”.¹⁵ So, it is clear that God initiated and planned out the process of redemption and salvation for mankind and that this plan was for no other reason than God’s glory. Rom 8:29-31 sheds a little more light on the subject. The process of salvation is once again mapped out for the believer. Here Paul draws out God’s plan for those “called according to His purpose” on the backdrop of suffering. He says that, the process of salvation involves the predestining of those whom he foreknew for the purpose of looking like Christ. Since this was His plan, He called those whom He predestined and declared them righteous and will eventually glorify them in their life after death. So, the plan is foreknowledge, predestination, justification, and glorification. The point in this passage is that just as God has a plan for their salvation, so He has a plan and purpose for all that happens in the believer’s life; namely their looking like Christ or in theological terms: their sanctification! Michael Horton comments on this passage and the meaning of foreknowledge. He says: “Foreknew must be seen as synonymous with ‘being intimately acquainted’—not with facts about the person (i.e. his response), but with the person himself or herself.”¹⁶ In the next chapter of Romans, Paul continues his thoughts on salvation. James White suggests that chapter 9 seems to be a response to some criticism over why only a small number of Jews embraced the Gospel: “Oh come now, Paul, if God is so

¹⁵ ESV, 1:4-6

¹⁶ Put Amazing Back Into Grace: Embracing the Heart of the Gospel. 2nd Edition. Grand Rapids: Baker Books. 2002. Pg. 70

sovereign and powerful, then why do His very people, the Jews, by and large reject Christ?"¹⁷ In Rom 9, Paul is speaking with this in mind: that even though he desires all Jews were a part of the Kingdom, the absence of many of them does not mean that the Word of God has failed. In fact, the choosing of Jacob over Esau is a good example of how not all of Abraham's seed are the actual people of Israel; but it furthers the belief that God elects some not based on works but His own purposes. Paul then anticipates criticism by stating that God is not unjust for choosing Jacob over Esau, but as He told Moses: "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."¹⁸ He furthers his argument, that God's election has nothing to do with works but with God's mercy,¹⁹ by again using an example from Moses' era. God says to Pharaoh, I have raised you up to show my power in you and so that my name would be proclaimed on all the Earth.²⁰ The point then is that God has a plan which makes His name famous over the entire world, and as the Creator, He has the ability to do just that! Listen to his question towards the end of the Chapter:

"What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory..."²¹

One final passage must be discussed: 1 Peter 3:18-22 and 4:6 which is one of the most obscure passages known in the Bible. Some interpret this passage to mean that there is an

¹⁷ The Potter's Freedom. Amityville, NY: Calvary Press Publishing. 2000. Pg. 205.

¹⁸ ESV, Romans 9:15

¹⁹ Romans 9:16

²⁰ Romans 9:17

²¹ Verses 22-23, ESV

opportunity for salvation after death (this will be discussed later in the paper), however, this does not seem to be the author's original intent. Nash says that the context which this controversial passage is wrapped around is the begging of Peter for the Christians to "remain faithful to the work of witnessing and evangelism in spite of persecution."²² The verses in chapter 3 must be separated from those in chapter four; for they are two somewhat different thoughts from the Apostle Peter. As was stated earlier, the context of chapter 3 is that Christians ought to faithfully witness during times of persecution, while the context of chapter 4 seems to be dealing with Christian conduct and how that conduct plays out in the culture. Millard Erickson says that probably the best defense against those who would use this passage to say that salvation is offered after death would be the context.²³ Now the question still remains, did Christ preach the Gospel in hell, between his death and earthly resurrection? The answer is a resounding, "NO;" for this does not seem consistent within the context. Peter is declaring in this chapter that the Christians ought to present the Gospel with patience and humility. They are to, "always be ready to give a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect."²⁴ Christ preaching a Gospel to the unrepentant in Hell does not seem to be consistent with the rest of the passage. Listen to what Erickson says is the best possible interpretation of chapter 3:18-20: "Christ "in Spirit" preached through Noah when Noah was building the ark. This was a message of repentance and righteousness, given to unbelieving

²² Ronald H. When a Baby Dies: Answers to Comfort Grieving Parents. Grand Rapids: Zondervan. 1999. pg. 41

²³ Erickson, Millard J. "Is There Opportunity For Salvation After Death?" Bibliotheca Sacra. Issue 152: April-June, 1995. Pg. 140.

²⁴ ESV, 1 Peter 3:15

persons who were then on earth but are now ‘spirits in prison’ (i.e., persons in hell).”²⁵ Therefore, verse 6 in chapter 4 deals predominantly with persons who lived in the world at the time of Peter and the audience, whom did not believe in the Gospel. Not only does this passage do damage to the view that salvation can happen after death (postmortem salvation), but the biblical account is clear that mankind is accountable for their deeds done here on Earth.²⁶ The bottom line is that postmortem judgment is based upon premortem conditions.²⁷

Theological Understanding:

Normally in systematic theology one would start with total depravity to state the biblical case for Infant Salvation; however, the current author deems it necessary to start with God and His reconciliation of mankind. This is not a suggestion that all systematic theologies be changed, but has the mind of trying to start where salvation truly begins: in the mind, initiation, and plan of God. Sin did not surprise God; in fact He had already planned for it and its affects. This plan was one that the angels and not even Satan could have seen coming, which is what makes it all the more amazing. Michael Horton says it well: “Who thought God would set out to recover a race of rebels? Just as the race declared war, God announced peace.”²⁸ Ephesians chapter 1 was discussed earlier, and it surely declares that God had humankind’s election in mind

²⁵ Ibid. pg. 137

²⁶ Revelation 20:11-13 & Hebrews 9:27 do much damage to the proponents of this view.

²⁷Nash, Ronald H. When a Baby Dies: Answers to Comfort Grieving Parents. Grand Rapids: Zondervan. 1999. Pg. 42

²⁸ Put Amazing Back Into Grace: Embracing the Heart of the Gospel. 2nd Edition. Grand Rapids: Baker Books. 2002. Pg. 57

even before He created the world.²⁹ “(Unconditional) election is an expression of God’s sovereign will or good pleasure. It is not based on any merit in the one elected, nor on foreseeing that the individual will believe. It is the cause, not the result, of faith.”³⁰ Wayne Grudem defines Unconditional Election this way: “Election is an act of God before creation in which he chooses some people to be saved, not on account of any foreseen merit in them, but only because of his sovereign good pleasure.”³¹ When it comes to infant salvation, the salvation of children and the mentally incapable who cannot make morally responsible choices, it is suggested that there are a few biblically sound alternatives to unconditional election. One would be that when anyone dies without hearing and being able to understand the Gospel they are given a second chance after death. This view is called postmortem salvation and is defended in scripture with 1 Peter 3:18-21 & 4:6 which this paper has already discussed. It was established at that point to be a poor and heretical rendering of the passages and therefore the theory was debunked. Another theological alternative would be that of baptismal regeneration. Ronald Nash gives evidence that many who hold to this fact make the error of linking “born of water” with the ordinance Jesus put into place right before His ascension.³² He says this as well: “humans are never saved by anything that they have done. Our salvation is based totally and exclusively on God’s unmerited favor—that is, grace.”³³ Therefore, unconditional election is

²⁹ Ephesians 1:4

³⁰ Erickson, Millard J. *Christian Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic. 2nd Edition. 2006. Pg. 930. *Words in the parentheses belong to the current author of this paper.*

³¹ *Systematic Theology*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan. 1994. Pg. 670.

³² *When a Baby Dies: Answers to Comfort Grieving Parents*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan. 1999. Pg. 51

³³ *Ibid.* pg. 53.

clearly defined in and throughout scripture, and looking back on the passages discussed earlier in this paper one cannot help but see God is truly the originator and initiator of this plan. Looking at the progression of Rom 8 God's order of salvation, the blueprint of salvation shown in Eph 1 and Paul's defense against unconditional elections' detractors in Rom 9 are convincing enough. But, when Rom 5:12-21 is also thrown into the mix, there is no other alternative.

Total Depravity is what makes unconditional election the only possible way in which mankind can have faith. It is clear from the scripture discussed earlier³⁴ that mankind is basically a corpse who cannot and will not seek out God; in fact, they are completely and utterly incapable of such an action. Horton says, "(mankind) is dead to God and alive to self, they are incapable of taking a single step toward God, not because of some internal defect or external pressure, but due to the bondage of the unregenerated will."³⁵ In regards to infants and those incapable of morally responsible decisions, one must make a distinction here. It is true that all human beings are depraved and deserving of the penalty of death, but the morally incapable are just that: unable to do any deed good or bad. This brings about the question: since the morally incapable are depraved and have a sin nature, will they be sent to hell? The fact is, the final judgment, according to Rev 20, will be based upon sins committed while on earth³⁶; and the morally incapable will not be judged for sins done on earth because they did not truly commit any actual sins. There must be a distinction between the morally incapable and the morally

³⁴ Eph 2:1-3, Rom 5:12-21 & even Rom 3

³⁵ Put Amazing Back Into Grace: Embracing the Heart of the Gospel. 2nd Edition. Grand Rapids: Baker Books. 2002. Pg. 51

³⁶ Rev 20:11-12. Nash comments on the use of "Great and Small": "there is no support for the claim of some that the words refer to adults and children. The reference is to the powerful and the weak, the famous and unknown..."

capable who have not heard the Gospel. John Cumming is quoted by Nash, in regards to Romans 1 and its condemnation for those who have never heard: “the language is clearly dealing with responsible adults...But these characteristics do not belong to infants. They do not comprehend the authority, nature and obligations of the law...They cannot be accused of neither rejecting the gospel nor of violating the law.”³⁷ Nash also, using a thought by R.A. Webb, makes a valid point in regards to all the morally incapable being a part of the elect: “(if a deceased infant) were sent to hell on no other account than that of original sin, there would be good reason to the divine mind for the judgment, but the child’s mind would be a perfect blank as to the reason of its suffering...It could not tell its neighbor—it could not tell itself—why it was so awfully smitten; and consequently the whole meaning of its sufferings, being to it a conscious enigma, the very essence of penalty would be absent, and justice would be disappointed of its vindication.”³⁸ Therefore, Webb concludes that all infants who die are a part of the elect predestined for salvation.³⁹

Justification is defined in the Evangelical Dictionary of Theology as being, “the act of pronouncing, accepting and treating as just, i.e., as, on the one hand, not penally liable, and, on the other hand, entitled to all the privileges due to those who have kept the law.”⁴⁰ Earlier Rom 5 was discussed and it is within this passage where one sees the order justification has in salvation: it is only offered to the elect once they have received Christ’s righteousness. This is probably a

³⁷ When a Baby Dies: Answers to Comfort Grieving Parents. Grand Rapids: Zondervan. 1999. Pg. 63

³⁸ Ibid. pg. 64

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Edited: Walter A. Elwell. 2nd Edition. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic. 2006. “Justification” by J.I. Paker. Pg. 643.

simultaneous act, but it is important to one's understanding of God's grace, mercy and unconditional election. John Piper says that Rom 5:15-18 helps one to, "...see the righteousness and obedience of Christ as a gift."⁴¹ In other words, perfect righteousness is necessary for justification, and that righteousness can only be attained by the merits of Christ and imputed to mankind because of God's abounding gift of grace.

Practical Implications:

What one believes about Salvation and mankind can have drastic affects on the hope or loss of hope one may have for their loved one. For instance, if someone were to believe (as all Armenians do) that there must be a willful response by a person to receive salvation; a confrontation with this topic may lend them to making theological leaps they would not normally make. The two main theological systems within Evangelicalism are Arminianism and Calvinism. The problem with the Armenian system in regards to this topic is the fact that no infant or morally incapable could ever make a willful decision based of repentance and faith. Therefore, they have a couple of options: 1) all of them die and go to hell; 2) all are given a chance to make a choice after death; and 3) deny the depravity of all the morally incapable. The only option that is consistent in their system would be number 1. "Armenians cannot consistently believe that any human being, child or adult can be a passive recipient of salvation."⁴² Therefore the Calvinistic system with its emphasis on totally depraved human beings reconciled to God by the justification of Christ and regeneration of the Holy Spirit seems to be the best system to

⁴¹ Counted Righteous In Christ: Should we abandon the imputation of Christ's Righteousness. Wheaton: Crossway Books & Desiring God Foundation. 2002. Pg. 112.

⁴²Nash, Ronald H. When a Baby Dies: Answers to Comfort Grieving Parents. Grand Rapids: Zondervan. 1999. Pg. 63

answer this question. There is hope which can be found by grieving parents and loved ones who have lost their morally incapable child; and that hope is found in no one other than Jesus Christ, and it is only through Him where their election can be established. Not only is there hope for the child, but also a hope for the parents and loved ones to see her again. This theological system provides the Pastor opportunities to answer the question of the little baby's destiny and the future hope of the parents to see them again, without any fear or compromise on the scriptures. The Pastor can also share with the parents the hope of the Gospel and lead them to an understanding of Christ's work on their behalf. The Calvinistic system should bring about a different kind of preaching, which urges all to go make disciples and explains the confidence they ought to have as they go! There also should never come a time where any Christian who holds to Calvinism rests from sharing the Gospel with the world around them. Not only does this disobey scripture, but Christians should never be okay with someone dying without ever hearing the glorious truth about Christ and His work! This theological understanding ought to also have two major effects on the evangelism of the Christian. First of all, there should be urgency in their heart to go unto all the world and make disciples. Secondly, there ought to be a confidence that the mission of the Church is not to convince people of the Gospel, but to share the good news and rest in the effectual call of the Holy Spirit.

In conclusion, this topic is indeed difficult; but when truly approached and studied in the scriptures one will find hope, confidence and awesome truth. The Bible is very clear regarding the salvation of infants, if one only spends the time necessary. There is hope in Christ, and He will not send any infant or morally incapable to hell, since they are in fact a part of the elect. This hope does not take away the hurt, but allows the believer to grow to become like Christ as they

wait on the LORD and it gives answers to their hard questions. All the while God looks more and more glorious! Ephesians 2:7 says: "...so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in his kindness toward us in Christ Jesus."

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