

The Salvation of Infants

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Introduction

Whether one is serving in a local church or Bible school setting, the issue concerning the salvation of infants is sure to arise. The death of a child is a tragic time for any family, and what grieving parents have not at least entertained the question, “Will we see our baby again in heaven?” Bible students often ask about the salvation of infants, usually in the context of the doctrine of salvation or original sin. They want to know what the Bible teaches since they know the issue will certainly come up in their own ministries. I have asked myself the same question, both as a seminary student and as a parent, since my wife and I lost our first baby due to a miscarriage. The question, therefore, is an important one, both in terms of our doctrine and our practical ministry.

What *does* the Bible say? Will infants who die be saved? Our response to this question is usually to turn immediately to 2 Sam 12:23 and David’s statement concerning his infant son who had just died: “I shall go to him, but he will not return to me.” While this passage may shed light on our question, it may not be our best starting point. It may be better first to address several important theological issues. First, how does God view the spiritual state of an infant? Is it innocent or guilty before a holy God? Second, on what basis could God save an infant? Once we’ve answered these questions we will be in a better position to apply our conclusions to specific passages such as 2 Sam 12:23.

The Spiritual State of Infants: Relative Innocence

In order to understand how God views the spiritual state of infants we turn first to Deut 1:39, a passage often overlooked in discussions of infant salvation. In Deuteronomy 1 Moses is recounting to the Israelites their rebellion against the Lord at Kadesh–barnea. After ten of the twelve spies gave an evil report, the Israelites would not trust God and cried out, “And why is the LORD bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become plunder; would it not be better for us to return to Egypt?” (Num 14:3).¹ As judgment for their unbelief, the Lord promised that all the adults with the exception of Joshua and Caleb would die in the wilderness (vv. 29–30). However, as for their children, who they “said would become a prey,” God would “bring them in, and they shall know the land which you have rejected” (v. 31). As Moses later recounts this event he puts it this way, “Moreover, your little ones who you said would become a pray, and your sons, who this day have no knowledge of good or evil, shall enter there, and I will give it to them and they shall possess it” (Deut 1:39).

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all quotations will be from the NASB.

It is God's assessment of these children as having "no knowledge of good or evil" that is important for our discussion. This combination of a form of the root "know" (יָדַע) with the words "good and evil" (טוֹב וְרָע) is found only seven times in the OT: Gen 2:9, 17, 3:5, 22; Deut 1:39; and Isa 7:15, 16. It will be good for us to examine these passages, beginning in Genesis, in order to understand what it means to "know good and evil." Concerning Gen 2:9, 17, which speaks of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, there are two usual interpretations. First, some view the tree as providing knowledge for *God*, so that *God* would "know" whether Adam would hold fast to the "good" or choose the "evil." Second, others connect the knowledge with *experience*: by eating the fruit of the tree Adam would come "to know, by sad experience, the value of the 'good' he had forfeited, and the bitterness of 'evil' which he had before known only in name."²

The problem with the first interpretation is that it makes *God's knowledge* the focus of the tree: if Adam eats the fruit then *God* will know something. But Gen 3:5, 22 makes it clear that it is *Adam's own knowledge* of good and evil, not *God's*, which is the result of Adam's eating the fruit of the tree. The second interpretation is also doubtful, since it implies that the way to gain the knowledge of good and evil is to *commit* evil. But if this were true then how could *God* say in Gen 3:22 that by eating the fruit Adam "has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil?" *God's* knowledge of good and evil has certainly not arisen from His having committed evil!

The best way to understand the significance of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is to relate it to Adam's *will*, in the sense that *he himself chose* or *decided for himself* what was good and what was evil. The underlying truth of *God's* command in Gen 2:17 is that only *God* has the right to decide what is good and what is evil. Man must not decide for himself, but must trust *God's* judgment.³ It was when Adam *decided for himself* what was good and what was evil that he became like *God*, "knowing good and evil." Therefore, on the basis of Genesis 2–3 we may conclude that to know good and evil is to *decide for oneself* what is good and what is evil.

Returning to Deut 1:39, we may apply this principle to the little Israelite children who had no knowledge of good or evil. What this means, then, is that they had not yet *chosen* good and evil. In other words, because of their young age they did not yet have the intellectual and moral capacity to *decide for themselves* what is good or evil. It is because of this fact that Augustus Strong ascribes to small children "a relative innocence," since they have not yet "personally transgressed."⁴ *God* did not consider the Israelite children guilty of rebellion, but rather spared them because of their innocence and allowed them to enter the Promised Land.

We find this same idea in the last two OT references to the phrase "to know good and evil," Isa 7:15, 16. In this prophecy the age of the promised child is made the measure of the time that Judah will be in danger from her two enemies, Damascus and Samaria.⁵ In v. 15, the infant is described as knowing "to refuse evil and choose good." This is what we have seen already, that to *know* good and evil is to *decide* what is good and evil. In v. 16, we read that the enemies of

² Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, 207.

³ John Sailhamer, "Genesis," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, 45.

⁴ Augustus Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 661.

⁵ Edward Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, vol. 1, p. 291.

Judah will fall “*before* the boy will know ... to refuse evil and choose good.” This speaks of that period of relative innocence, that time *before* a child is intellectually and morally capable of deciding what is good and what is evil. It has been suggested that the age of official accountability is in view here, which can run anywhere from twelve to twenty years of age.⁶ However, in light of the parallel thought in Isa 8:4, which speaks of a time “before the boy knows how to cry out ‘My father’ or ‘My mother,’” it seems best to think that a much younger age is in view here, namely the time of infancy before speech is attained. “In the length of time that it would take an infant to reach the age where he could stammer out, ‘my father,’ and, ‘my mother,’ the Assyrian king would come and devastate the two northern powers.”⁷

Besides the seven passages just considered, two more support the contention that the Bible ascribes to small children a relative innocence by virtue of their lack of ability to discern good and evil. First, in Jonah 4:11, God has compassion on the 120,000 Ninevites “who do not know the difference between their right and left hand.” Some argue that this is a reference to the entire population of Nineveh, who were “virtual children” before God.⁸ But in light of the obvious parallel between this verse and the others discussed above, it is better to view these persons as the small children of Nineveh. God mentions animals in v. 11 in order to compare the innocence of the children to that of the animals—animals toward which God also showed compassion when He delivered Nineveh from destruction.⁹

The last passage which shows the relative innocence of small children in the eyes of God is Romans 9:11. Here Paul is speaking of the moral state of Esau and Jacob, yet unborn, who “had not done anything good or bad.” They were in a certain sense still innocent before God.¹⁰ To conclude this part of our discussion, the Scriptures do teach that small children possess a relative innocence before God. God does not hold them accountable for personal transgressions, since they are not yet capable of knowing good and evil. They do not even have the intellectual ability to choose between their right and left hand, saying nothing of the moral ability to choose between good and evil.

The Spiritual State of Infants: Basic Guilt

The idea of infants possessing relative innocence leads us to another question. Does it mean that in God’s eyes small children are completely innocent, not “basically sinful and guilty,” as Millard Erickson argues?¹¹ The Scriptures do not go this far. In fact, there is a sense in which even infants are guilty before God. Are they guilty of their own personal transgressions? No, they are not, hence their *relative* innocence outlined above. Are they guilty as descendants of sinful Adam? Yes, and this is the basic guilt that all people possess before God, even from birth. David declares in Psalm 51:5, “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me.” As Charles Ryrie points out in explaining this verse, “It is not that the acts of

⁶ John Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah Chapters 1–39*, NICOT, 214.

⁷ Young, *Isaiah*, vol. 1, 303.

⁸ E.g. Leslie Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, NICOT, p. 234.

⁹ Cf. also Ps 36:6.

¹⁰ They had yet to commit individual sins, although they would possess sin natures from birth. More on this below.

¹¹ Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed., 654–55.

giving birth or conceiving are in themselves sinful, but that from the moment of conception a person possesses a sinful nature.”¹² Psalm 58:3 confirms this truth, stating that, “The wicked are estranged from the womb; these who speak lies go astray from birth.” Acts of sin arise from the sinful nature of a man.

Job agrees, using the phrase “born of a woman” to describe man’s sinful nature: “What is man, that he should be pure, or he who is born of a woman, that he should be righteous?” (Job 15:14). Job used the same phrase “born of a woman” in 14:1 before asking, “Who can make the clean out of the unclean?” (v. 4). Later, Bildad echoes the words of Job, asking in 25:4, “How then can a man be just with God? Or how can he be clean who is born of woman?” To be born of a woman, then, by its very nature implies the possession of sin inherited from Adam through one’s parents (Ps 51:5). Of course, in this I exclude the Lord Jesus Christ who, while “born of a woman, born under the Law” (Gal 4:4), in reality came only “in the likeness of sinful flesh” (Rom 8:3), so that He who knew no sin might be made sin for us (2 Cor 5:21). Apart from Jesus Christ, all other children who have ever been born into this world have arrived bearing the mark of sin upon their hearts.

Paul argues this same point when he states in Eph 2:3 that as unbelievers we were “by nature children of wrath.” In other words, in our natural condition as descendants of Adam we were deserving of God’s wrath.¹³ This is why, as Paul puts it, “death reigned from Adam until Moses” (Rom 5:14). This is why even infants die in the first place: they are born with the guilt of Adam’s sin engraved upon their hearts and fused into their very nature. The wages of sin is death (Rom 6:23). Even in the case of Jacob and Esau in Romans 9, although they had not yet committed personal acts of sin, God considered them as having sinful natures. Paul’s point is that God freely chose to have mercy and compassion on the sinner Jacob, while choosing not to show Esau mercy and leaving him in his sin (vv. 15–18). Even though they had yet to commit individual acts of sin, God saw them as sinners when He took them under consideration.¹⁴

The Nature of Infant Salvation

Since Scripture confirms that infants are born in sin (Ps 51:5), are guilty of Adam’s sin (Rom 5:12), and are by their very nature deserving of God’s wrath (Eph 2:3), we must now ask the logical question: *on what basis could individuals who die in infancy possibly be saved?* I have already partially answered this question. Earlier, we saw that because God recognizes the lack of intellectual and moral ability of small children, He views them differently than He does those who have attained that stage of development and have personally chosen evil over good. God views infants as existing in a state of relative innocence. Thus, in compassion He may choose to save those who die in that relatively innocent spiritual state. But on what basis can He save them? This is the question to which we now must turn.

¹² Charles Ryrie, *The Ryrie Study Bible*, in loc.

¹³ BAGD, 869.

¹⁴ However, I must add that according to the Scriptures, God will *not* judge the lost on the basis of *his* not choosing them, but rather on the basis of *their* works, the sinful deeds they committed as responsible moral agents during their lives (Rev 20:12–13; cf. Matt 16:27; Ps 62:12; Prov 24:12; Rom 2:6).

Stated briefly, on the one hand God can save infants on the same *basis* on which He saves anyone else. On the other hand, however, He must by necessity save them in a *way* that is quite different from the way in which He saves others. I will now explain what I mean.

Concerning the first point, the *similarity* between the salvation of an infant and that of anyone else, we know from the NT that it is only on the basis of the blood of Jesus Christ that anyone is saved. This salvation in Christ is clearly a free gift of God's grace, and not of good works (Rom 3:24; 6:23; Eph 2:8–9; Titus 3:5). Thus, even infants cannot be saved “on the basis of their own righteousness or innocence.”¹⁵ If children who die in infancy are to be saved, it must be in the same way as any other person: on the basis of God's grace offered as a free gift through the shed blood of His Son Jesus Christ on the cross as payment for the sins of all mankind, including the inborn sin and guilt of infants.

As for the second point, the way in which the salvation of an infant is *different*, we must discuss the element of faith, for just as surely as the NT teaches salvation by grace, it also describes it as coming through faith (Rom 10:17; Eph 2:8; Gal 2:16). But can an infant exercise faith if it cannot yet decide between good from evil? The answer is clearly no, and so this is the sense in which an infant is saved in a way that is different from the normal way of salvation: God does not require personal faith in the case of the infant. This is Strong's argument: “the condition of salvation for adults is personal faith. Infants are incapable of fulfilling this condition. Since Christ has died for all, we have reason to believe that provision is made for their reception of Christ in some other way.”¹⁶

John Calvin agrees, insisting that while Paul in Rom 10:17 makes hearing the beginning of faith, Paul is only describing the *usual* method which the Lord uses in calling people to Himself. Paul is “not laying down an invariable rule, for which no other method can be substituted.”¹⁷ Attempting to bind God to this rule of salvation through personal faith is like “giving a law to God,” that is, dictating to God how He *must* or *must not* save individuals. And this is certainly not the prerogative of any human being! As Calvin puts it, God “sanctifies whom he pleases,”¹⁸ and I might add *as* He pleases, whether by personal faith or otherwise. I may also add in conclusion that even the faith that we ourselves exercise when we trust Christ is part of the complete package of salvation that is “the gift of God, not as a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph 2:8–9; cf. also Acts 18:27; Phil 1:29).

Biblical Examples of Infant Salvation

We have concluded our discussion of the theological principles involved with our main question—that is, how God views the spiritual condition of infants, and how by His grace He is able to save them. Now let us return to what we briefly considered at the outset: the application of these principles to specific cases in Scripture. Does the Bible offer any examples of God saving infants? Yes it does, and to these examples we now turn.

¹⁵ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 500.

¹⁶ Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 662.

¹⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, book IV, 542.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 541.

We may first of all consider several examples of men called by God for special ministry even before they were born. First, in 2 Sam 12:24–25 we read that when Solomon was just a newborn baby, “the LORD loved him.” The Lord then sent word to Nathan the prophet to name the boy Jedediah, “beloved of the LORD.” We may go back even further to 2 Samuel 7, where the Lord predicted the special relationship He would have with Solomon, the heir to David’s throne. The Lord would be a Father to him, and he would be a son to the Lord (v. 14), and the Lord’s lovingkindness would not depart from him (v. 15). Now while we cannot declare that Solomon was *saved* as an infant, we do see that God *predicted* His love for Solomon before Solomon’s birth, He *confirmed* that love at Solomon’s birth, and He *never withdrew* His lovingkindness from Solomon.

Second, we read in Jer 1:5 that before Jeremiah was even born God had already *known* him, *consecrated* him, and *appointed* him as a prophet to the nations. Third, in similar fashion Paul realized in Gal 1:15 that he had been *set apart by God from his mother’s womb* as an apostle to the Gentiles. Fourth, Paul states in Rom 9:11–13 that God chose to love Jacob and have mercy and compassion on him even before he was born. Last, in Psalm 139, as David considers how God formed him in his mother’s womb (vv. 13–16), he realizes that all his days were written in God’s book “when as yet there was not one of them” (v. 16). Again, as in the case of Solomon, we cannot go so far as to say that Jeremiah, Paul, Jacob, and David were saved as infants. But we can surely conclude that God *knew* of their salvation and service even while they were yet infants in their mother’s womb, thus *guaranteeing* that their salvation would surely be accomplished at the proper time.

It is true that the above examples merely reveal the *potential* for infant salvation, and only *predict* the salvation of infants. However, in the case of John the Baptist we see more than potential and prediction: we read of his actual *possession* of salvation *as an infant*. In Luke 1:15, the angel Gabriel predicts that John would “be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother’s womb” (cf. vv. 41, 44). This is truly a remarkable verse. As Grudem comments, “We might say that John the Baptist was ‘born again’ before he was born!”¹⁹ Here, then, we have a true biblical example of the salvation of an infant, and what God did in the case of John the Baptist He is surely capable of doing for others.²⁰

But again, in none of the above examples do we read of an infant who had *died*. And so now we return to the one possible example, David’s son in 2 Sam 12:23. Did this infant go to heaven when he died? We may confidently answer “yes” for two reasons. First, David’s words “I shall go to him” indicate this. While some argue that David is merely speaking of “joining his son in death,”²¹ David’s words indicate “personal reunion ... he would one day see and be with his son.”²² And heaven was the place where David was sure he would go when he died: “I will dwell

¹⁹ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 500.

²⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, book IV, 541. An alternate explanation of John the Baptist is that while the Spirit may have come upon him in the OT sense for his particular task as the Messiah’s herald, this does not necessarily mean he was saved at that point.

²¹ E.g. Ryrie, *Study Bible*, in loc.; cf. John Walvoord and Roy Zuck, ed., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament Edition*, 468.

²² Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 501, n. 20.

in the house of the LORD forever” (Ps 23:6). While the phrase translated “forever” in the NASB literally means “to length of days” (לְאֶרְךָ יָמִים), the translation “forever” is proper for two reasons. First, “the logic of God’s covenant allows no ending to His commitment to a man.”²³ Thus, it would be proper for David to view that relationship as extending beyond his earthly life. Second, the same phrase is found only one more time in the Hebrew Bible, in Ps 93:5, where in light of the context (v. 2) the meaning is clearly “forevermore.”

There is a second reason to be confident of the salvation of David’s son. Besides his words, David’s behavior indicates that he had assurance that his infant son was with the Lord in heaven. We read that when David received the news of his son’s death, he calmly arose, washed, anointed himself, changed his clothes, came into the house of the Lord and worshipped Him, and then returned to his house and ate (2 Sam 12:20). David’s servants were amazed that he did not grieve even more when his son died (v. 21; cf. v. 18). David’s answer indicates a calm assurance that even though he had lost his son, the child was safe with the Lord. While “David was bereft, he was content” in that knowledge.²⁴

Conclusion

In this paper I have dealt with four theological principles that lie behind the question of infant salvation. (1) God views infants as possessing a relative innocence because of their intellectual and moral inability to decide between good and evil. (2) While infants are relatively innocent in the sense that they have not yet committed personal acts of sin, they are nevertheless born with the guilt of Adam’s sin upon their heart and in their very nature. (3) Therefore, if God will save infants, it cannot be on the basis of their innocence, but rather on the basis of God’s grace offered as a free gift through the blood of Jesus Christ, as in the case with anyone who is saved. (4) However, infant salvation differs from the salvation of others in the matter of faith. Salvation is a gift which God is free to give *as* He pleases and *when* He pleases. God need not require faith from those intellectually incapable of exercising it.²⁵ Even in requiring faith, God graciously supplies the ability to exercise it (Acts 18:27) to those He chooses (Acts 13:48).

With these principles as a backdrop, we examined several passages and found that in some cases God *predicted* the salvation of an infant, thus guaranteeing its coming to pass. But as we saw in the case of John the Baptist, he actually *possessed* salvation while still in his mother’s womb. This, I believe, is the strongest proof we have from Scripture that God can and does save infants. I argued in closing that 2 Sam 12:23 is the one biblical example of an infant who died and went to be with the Lord in heaven. I close with one last question: how many infants does God save? While I agree with Grudem that Scripture does not answer this question for us directly,²⁶ on the basis of the principles presented above I agree with Strong that God saves all who die in infancy.²⁷ Calvin’s conclusion may serve as ours: “I everywhere teach that no one can be justly condemned and perish except on account of actual sin; and to say that the countless mortals

²³ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1–72*, TOTC, 112–13.

²⁴ Joyce Baldwin, *1 & 2 Samuel*, TOTC, 241.

²⁵ I include here those with severe mental handicaps who are also incapable of exercising faith.

²⁶ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 500.

²⁷ Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 662.

taken from life while yet infants are cast down from their mother's arms into eternal death is a blasphemy to be universally detested."²⁸

²⁸ John Calvin, "The Secret Providence of God in Reply to the Calumnies of Castalio," 644–45. The above quote is actually a paraphrase by Charles W. Shields, "The Doctrine of Calvin Concerning Infant Salvation," *Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 1 (1890): 643, cited in Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 663. Calvin's exact wording appears on p. 641 of Shields's article.