

What Happens to Those Who Die as Infants?

Rod Reynolds

A question that has often been asked among professing Christians is: “What happens to those who die as infants?” Often, among professing Christians, the question is do they “go to heaven or to hell?” What does the Bible itself teach about the salvation or damnation of those who die as infants, or in childhood? What about those who are aborted, or stillborn?

The death of infants, stillborn or aborted children, has been commonplace throughout most of recorded history. Fathers and mothers not uncommonly grieve deeply over such deaths. And, if they profess Christianity, may wonder about the fate of such children in terms of eternal salvation or damnation.

On the other hand, human sacrifice, and especially the sacrifice of infants or children, has been commonplace among various heathen nations, from early historical times.

Among those who practiced human sacrifice in ancient times were the Greeks and Romans, as well as the Phoenicians and Canaanites. The Romans ostensibly banned human sacrifice in 97 B.C. Nevertheless, the Romans continued to hold gladiatorial games for entertainment, and in part, as religious ritual. Gladiatorial and other brutal games in the Roman Colosseum commonly ended in the deaths of combatants.

“The welter of blood in gladiatorial and wild-beast shows, the squeals and smell of the human victims and of slaughtered animals.... For... Romans... [were] associated with religious sacrifice” (“Murderous Games: Gladiatorial Contests in Ancient Rome,” Keith Hopkins, *History Today*, June, 1983)

Greek and Roman writers documented the practice of the Carthaginians who sacrificed infants to appease their gods.

“For example, the 3d-century B.C. Greek author Kleitarchos [often spelled Cleitarchus] is credited with the following report from Carthage, in which the author refers to the the Greek equivalent of the Carthaginian god Ba'al Hammon:

“Out of reverence for Kronos the Phoenicians, and especially the Carthaginians, whenever they seek to obtain some great favor, vow one of their children, burning it as a sacrifice to the deity, if they are especially eager to gain success. There stands in their midst a bronze statue of Kronos, its hands extended over a bronze brazier, the flames of which engulf the child. When the flames fall upon the body, the limbs contract and the open mouth seems almost to be laughing, until the body slips quietly into the brazier.” (“Relics of Carthage Show Brutality Amid the Good Life,” *New York Times*, September 1, 1987, nytimes.com).

Some scholars in recent decades began to claim that the Greek and Roman accounts of child sacrifice among the Carthaginians were just propaganda, and myth. However a group of Punic historians and archaeologists recently did a comprehensive study of the evidence of child sacrifice in ancient Carthage. Their conclusion is that, “...literary, epigraphical, archaeological and historical evidence ...confirms the Greek and Roman account of events...,”

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relating to child sacrifice among the Carthaginians. ("Carthaginians really did sacrifice their children," www.ox.ac.uk, 1-23-2014, retrieved 2-16-2018).

When God brought the Israelites into the land of their inheritance, he gave them the following instructions:

"When the Lord your God cuts off from before you the nations which you go to dispossess, and you displace them and dwell in their land, take heed to yourself that you are not ensnared to follow them, after they are destroyed from before you, and that you do not inquire after their gods, saying, 'How did these nations serve their gods? I also will do likewise.' You shall not worship the Lord your God in that way; for every abomination to the Lord which He hates they have done to their gods; for **they burn even their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods**" (Deuteronomy 12:29-31).

Yet, both Israel and Judah disobeyed this command, and turned to human sacrifice, offering their children as burnt offerings to their false gods. "'For the children of Judah have done evil in My sight,' says the Lord. 'They have set their abominations in the house which is called by My name, to pollute it. And they have built the high places of Tophet, which is in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, to **burn their sons and their daughters in the fire**, which I did not command, nor did it come into My heart'" (Jeremiah 7:30-31).

Traditional Catholic View

From the second century A.D. to to the Reformation, what became the Catholic Church dominated professing Christianity in terms of numbers and influence. There were various groups of Christians who opposed Roman Catholic teachings and practices throughout this period, but they were suppressed and persecuted by the powerful Roman Church.

In a report of an International Theological Commission concerning "The Hope of Salvation For Infants Who Die Without Being Baptised," published by the Vatican in 2007, the Catholic Church admits that there was little discussion in the literature of the Greek speaking Church on the fate of infants who died, but in the few instances where it was discussed the conclusion was that people dying in infancy were not punished by being sent to hell, or that their judgment is not revealed in Scripture.

In the fifth century A.D. a monk and theologian named Palagius taught against the concept of "original sin" being promoted by the influential Catholic theologian Augustine. He taught that children do not inherit the sin of their fathers and God does not punish children for the sins of their fathers.

Augustine responded by writing rebuttals in which he defended the doctrine of "original sin," and the necessity of infant baptism. The idea espoused by Augustine is that humans born after Adam inherit guilt for his sin, and are subject to punishment for that guilt unless absolved of the guilt of "original sin" through baptism.

"St. Augustine and many early fathers held that unbaptized infants go to Hell.... Thus, the Ecumenical Council of Florence [418 A.D.] declared: 'The souls of those who die in actual

mortal sin, or only in Original Sin, immediately descend into Hell' (*Denz.* 693). This is also the explicit teaching of the Council of Lyons II [1274 A.D.] (*Denz.* 464)" ("The Fate of Unbaptized Infants In Light of the Universal Necessity of Baptism," catholicism.org, 4-25-2005, retrieved 2-16-2018; "Denz." as used in this quotation refers to *Sources of Catholic Dogma*, by Heinrich Denzinger, which traces the development of Catholic doctrine from early times, with quotations from various sources). The doctrine described in the quotation was affirmed by other councils.

Augustine taught that infants who die without baptism suffer lesser punishment than others, but are nevertheless in hell. Fulgentius, a Roman Catholic Bishop of the fifth and sixth century, wrote: A soul "...that ...has lived in the body for the space of one day or one hour, it is necessary that it suffer with that same body the endless punishments of Hell, where the devil with his angles will burn forever. [...] Hold most firmly and never doubt that, not only adults with the use of reason but also children who either begin to live in the womb of their mothers and who die there or, already born from their mothers, pass from this world without the sacrament of holy baptism, must be punished with the endless penalty of eternal fire. Even if they have no sin from their actions, still, by their carnal conception and birth, they have contracted the damnation of original sin." (*To Peter on the Faith*, 36, 70; cited in "That Unbaptised Infants Have the Punishment of Fire and That Limbo is a Heretical Pelagian Fable;" romancatholicism.org; preserved at archive.org; retrieved 2-16-2018).

The sixth century Pope Gregory I asserted "...that God condemns even those with only original sin on their souls; even infants who have never sinned by their own will must go to 'everlasting torments'" (cited in "THE HOPE OF SALVATION FOR INFANTS WHO DIE WITHOUT BEING BAPTISED," ¶ 20, vatican.va; retrieved 2-16-2018).

In reality God uses infants and little children as a metaphor for innocence.

"At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, 'Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?' Then Jesus called a little child to Him, set him in the midst of them, and said, 'Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and **become as little children**, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven'" (Matthew 18:1-3).

The carnal, reprobate Israelites rejected God's ways and were rejected of him (Jeremiah 6:19, 30; Hosea 9:17). In their rebellion against God's explicit commands, the Israelites, "...mingled with the Gentiles And learned their works; They served their idols, Which became a snare to them. They even sacrificed their sons And their daughters to demons, And **shed innocent blood, The blood of their sons and daughters**, Whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan; And the land was polluted with blood" (Psalm 106:35-38; cf. Jeremiah 7:31; 19:1-6).

In effect, the Church which claimed to represent God, through their doctrine of infant damnation, was accusing God of wantonly casting innocent children into "hell," not just to be burned up in a brief span of time, as in the child sacrifices God condemned, but to be tormented forever in a cauldron of fire.

Later the idea of "Limbo," as a compartment of hell where infants are sent for a lesser

punishment, or by some accounts, no punishment, was devised by Catholic theologians.

In recent years the Catholic Church has further softened its position on the question of infant damnation. In a document I mentioned earlier published by the Vatican in 2007, it is stated that, "...we have sought to read the signs of the times and to interpret them in the light of the Gospel." The document goes on to conclude that there are, "...strong grounds for hope that God will save infants when we have not been able to do for them what we would have wished to do, namely, to baptize them into the faith and life of the Church" ("THE HOPE OF SALVATION FOR INFANTS WHO DIE WITHOUT BEING BAPTISED," ¶ 103). They express a "hope" that God will save infants from hell, but there is no guarantee. There, "...are reasons for prayerful *hope*, rather than grounds for sure knowledge" (*ibid.*, ¶ 102).

Some Catholics, still hold to the traditional notions of Augustine and like-minded Catholic leaders whose opinions on the subject held sway for several hundred years, and have continued to hold sway to some extent until very recently. Still others go beyond the document referred to earlier and state flatly "that all prenatals, infants, and young children without exception are saved by Christ," and that none is in any compartment of hell ("Catholic Teaching: Mystical Baptism and Limbo," Ronald L. Conte Jr., www.catholicplanet.com, 10-24-2016; retrieved 2-15-2018).

Traditional Protestant View

Protestants generally did not accept the idea of Limbo. But the prevailing idea remained for several centuries that unbaptized infants wound up in hell.

For example, John Calvin, one of the primary figures in the Reformation, wrote:

"Should all the sons of Adam come to dispute and contend with their Creator, because by his eternal providence they were **before their birth doomed** to perpetual destruction" (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 3, Chapter 23).

In the same chapter, Calvin wrote: "Now, since the arrangement of all things is in the hand of God, since to him belongs the disposal of life and death, he arranges all things by his sovereign counsel, in such a way that **individuals are born, who are doomed from the womb to certain death, and are to glorify him by their destruction.**"

Also in the same chapter: "I again ask how it is that the fall of Adam involves **so many nations with their infant children in eternal death without remedy** unless that it so seemed meet to God? Here the most loquacious tongues must be dumb. **The decree, I admit, is, dreadful; and yet it is impossible to deny that God foreknew what the end of man was to be before he made him, and foreknew, because he had so ordained by his decree.**"

"...**even infants bring their condemnation with them from their mother's womb**; for although they have not yet brought forth the fruits of their unrighteousness, **they have its seed included in them.** Nay, **their whole nature is, as it were, a seed of sin, and, therefore, cannot but be odious and abominable to God.**" (*Institutes*, Book 4, chapter 15,

paragraph 10).

“...infants who are to be saved (and that **some are saved at this age is certain**) must, without question, be previously regenerated by the Lord. For if they bring innate corruption with them from their mother’s womb, they must be purified before they can be admitted into the kingdom of God, into which shall not enter anything that defileth (Rev. 21:27). If they are born sinners, as David and Paul affirm, they must either remain unaccepted and hated by God, or be justified.” (*Institutes*, Book 4, chapter 16, paragraph 17).

Calvinism and the previous teachings of the Catholic Church strongly affected the direction of Protestantism in terms of its teachings concerning the fate of children who die. The prevailing traditional (or historical) teaching of Catholic and Protestant Christianity is that infants who die without being baptized are bound for hell.

There have been historically some sects and denominations that taught otherwise. For example, a confession of faith by British Baptists dating from 1679 states: “We do believe, that all little Children dying in their Infancy, (viz.) before they are capable to chuse either Good or Evil, whether born of Believing Parents, or Unbelieving Parents, shall be saved by the Grace of God, and Merit of Christ their Redeemer, and Work of the Holy Ghost, and so being made Members of the Invisible Church, shall enjoy Life everlasting; for our Lord Jesus saith, of such belongs the Kingdom of Heaven. Ergo, We conclude, that that opinion is false, which saith, That those little Infants dying before Baptism, are damned” (Article XLIV, “Of Children dying in Infancy”; original spelling).

However, for about 300 to 350 years such sentiments were in the minority within Protestant Christianity. Around the beginning of the 19th century, however, Protestant Churches began modifying their teachings regarding the damnation of unbaptized infants. Today, the majority of Protestant Churches teach that infants who die are not subject to punishment in hell. The prevailing idea is that they go to heaven, instead.

So what is the basis for the view that unbaptized infants are denied salvation and sent to hell, that prevailed in professing Christianity for well over a thousand years?

First, is the idea of Original Sin. This is the doctrine that the guilt of Adam's sin devolves upon all human beings born after Adam's sin.

Second, that the soul is immortal. This is the idea that when someone dies, he or she doesn't really die, but his or her “soul” continues to live a conscious existence apart from the body, and that it is either heaven, or hell, or in Catholic religion, purgatory, to which the soul migrates upon death.

Third, that this is the only day of salvation. When someone dies his or her judgment is sealed, and there is no further opportunity for salvation.

Fourth, that there is an ever burning hell, to which sinners are consigned upon death, and where they will be tortured forever, that is, for eternity; or at least be cut off from God, if not tortured.

Fifth, that heaven is the reward of the saved, and all who have been absolved of sin migrate to heaven at the time of death to be in the presence of God. In the Catholic scheme there is also purgatory where many go to be purged before being admitted to heaven. But the idea of purgatory is purely speculative and has no basis in Scripture.

It is these five doctrines, all of them false, that have led professing Christianity into such confusion, contradiction, and even blasphemy, concerning the fate of innocent children who die.

What Does the Bible Teach?

What does the Bible teach about “original sin”? The primary Scripture used to justify the “original sin” teaching that all humans bear the guilt of Adam's sin at birth is Romans 5:12: “Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned.”

There is nothing in this Scripture, however, or any Scripture that says newborn infants are guilty because of Adam's sin. It doesn't say **Adam's guilt** spread to all men, it says **death** spread to all men.

The chapter goes on to say: “Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even **over those who had not sinned according to the likeness of the transgression of Adam**, who is a type of Him who was to come” (Romans 5:14).

The effect of Adam's sin is that he and his progeny were made subject to death. All humans who have lived to be old enough to choose to disobey a law of God, have done so, with the exception of Jesus Christ. But not all have rebelled in the same way Adam did. Yet, even those who were generally obedient to God have sinned, and they have been and are subject to death.

When Adam sinned the judgment was death, that he should return to the dust whence he came. All mankind has been affected by that judgment. It is not the guilt that we have inherited, but the judgment of death, which is that we are mortal and as a result of our mortal nature we will die. That's actually the way Adam was created in the first place, but he could have been given eternal life had he obeyed God and eaten of the tree of life instead of the tree forbidden to him.

But even though we are subject to death, our judgment is not final. We still have access to eternal life through God's grace, just as Adam did. By yielding to God the death penalty for our sins can be removed, and we can have eternal life. And every human who has ever been or ever will be conceived will have the opportunity to receive the gift of eternal life.

Christ's death was an atonement for all mankind, so that all could have an opportunity to have eternal life: “My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. And **He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole**

world" (1 John 2:1-2). "...where sin abounded, grace abounded much more, so that as sin reigned in death, even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 5:20-21).

The final judgment that awaits mankind did not come when Adam sinned, and it does not affect us at birth. Our final judgment comes after death. "...as it is appointed for men to die once, but **after this the judgment**" (Hebrews 9:27).

The children of Adam are not held accountable for his sin, but for their own sins. "Fathers shall not be put to death for their children, nor shall the children be put to death for their fathers; a person shall be put to death for his own sin" (Deuteronomy 16:16).

The ultimate penalty for mankind is not the first death, but the **second death**, the death that will apply to the incorrigible following a future judgment. In due time, all will be given a chance to know God, and to repent. "It is written in the prophets, 'And **they shall all be taught by God.**' Therefore everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to Me" (John 6:45).

Not all have as yet been taught by God, but when all is said and done, all will have been taught by God. Those taught by God in this age, and who have responded to his teaching, by living lives of repentance, faith and obedience, will be resurrected to immortality at the first resurrection. "For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ's at His coming" (1 Corinthians 15: 22-23).

Others, not yet taught by God, or whose teaching is incomplete, will be resurrected later on, after the millennial rule of Jesus Christ. "Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books. The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades [the grave] delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works" (Revelation 20:11-13).

Notice that in this resurrection the (formerly) dead, not from an ever burning hell, but from the sea, and from their graves, etc., stand before God, and the books (the Bible) are opened. They are to be taught God's word. The Book of Life is opened, meaning they have an opportunity to receive the gift of eternal life. And then they are to be judged according to their works after they have been taught and given an opportunity to repent.

No one is going to be denied eternal life because of what Adam did, or what his or her parents did. Each one will be judged based on his or her willingness to repent and live a life of repentance and obedience to God.

"The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not bear the guilt of the father, nor the father bear the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself. But if a wicked man turns from all his sins

which he has committed, keeps all My statutes, and does what is lawful and right, he shall surely live; he shall not die. None of the transgressions which he has committed shall be remembered against him; because of the righteousness which he has done, he shall live. Do I have any pleasure at all that the wicked should die?' says the Lord God, 'and not that he should turn from his ways and live?'" (Ezekiel 18:20-23).

After the period of judgment following the second resurrection, all who have refused to be taught to the point of incorrigibility will suffer the second death. "Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire" (Revelation 20:14-15).

What the Bible Teaches About "Immortal Soul"

The Bible does not teach that humans have an immortal soul. Without getting into all the details, which are covered in our article, "What Is Death?", when a person dies, he has no conscious existence.

According to Scripture, when one dies, "His breath goes forth, he returns to his earth. In that very day his thoughts perish." (Psalm 146:4, ACV). "...the dead know nothing..." (Ecclesiastes 9:5). "...there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave..." (Ecclesiastes 9:10).

When a person dies, he sleeps in his grave, so to speak, to be awakened at the time of his resurrection (Job 14:10-15). He is not in a "hell" being tortured, nor is he in heaven. He is simply dead. The idea that infants go to heaven, inheriting eternal life at death, apart from faith in Christ, is no less a lie than is the idea that they go to hell to be tormented.

What the Bible Teaches About the "Only Day of Salvation"

"For He says: 'In an acceptable time I have heard you, And in the day of salvation I have helped you. Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation'" (2 Corinthians 6:2). But in the original Greek, there are no definite articles in this verse. Following is a more accurate translation of 1 Corinthians 6:2: "...for He saith, 'In an acceptable time I did hear thee, and in a day of salvation I did help thee, lo, now *is* a well-accepted time; lo, now, a day of salvation'" (Young's Literal Translation). The Bible does not teach that the opportunity for salvation is limited to this present age.

The Bible does teach that all who die will be resurrected. "Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which **all who are in the graves** will hear His voice and come forth--those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation [judgment]" (John 5:28-29). The Greek word *krisis* in this case does not mean condemnation, but judgment, as it's translated in Green's Literal Translation and several other modern translations.

Babies, infants, stillborn, aborted babies, and others who have been denied the opportunity to live out their lives, be taught of God, repent of their sins, and receive the gift of eternal life in God's kingdom, will be given that opportunity in a future age. Most human beings who are not

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in the first resurrection will be in the second resurrection, and have an opportunity then to be taught what is right and be judged by their works in a future age. They will be taught who is the real God in the resurrection, and then they will be individually judged based on their response to having been taught the truth, with full access to the Holy Spirit.

If they repent, and learn to obey God, and most will, each one will be able to take his or her place in the eternal kingdom of God. Thus we can see that God is truly just and merciful, and that he is no respecter of persons. All human beings, in the final analysis, will have a full opportunity for salvation.

When you know the truth about this subject, you do not have to engage in mental gymnastics to make seem just what is unjust on its face. You don't have to imagine that there is another path to salvation other than faith in Jesus Christ. And you can rest assured that God is just, that he is no respecter of persons, and that everyone will have ample opportunity for salvation, no matter the circumstances of his life in this age.

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Messenger Church of God
PO Box 542
Peculiar, MO 64078
USA