

A Biblical Look at the Death of Infants

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Tragedy surrounds us. We hear of it every day on the evening news. We read about it in the newspaper and the internet. We witness it in the lives around us. Many, if not all of us, have experienced tragedy in our own lives. However, there is one tragedy that is profoundly heartbreaking – the death of an infant or young child. Ever since Adam and Eve found the limp body of their son Abel, this must be the greatest grief known to man.

For those who have not had to face this situation personally, many have been called upon to offer support for others. Perhaps you sat quietly with a grieving mother, who suddenly asked, “Is my baby in heaven?” What would you say? If you have been in that situation, you may have struggled for the right words to say. You probably declared that the infant was now in the presence of the Lord. Were you later plagued by the thought, “Is what I said true? How do I *know* that babies go to heaven when they die?”

How many of us have said what is “sentimentally necessary”¹ only to later wonder about the truthfulness of our words? We have no right to establish doctrine based on what we *hope* may be true. Instead, we must draw our answers from what the Bible *actually reveals* to be true. Our words may be what the grieving mother wanted to hear but are they what God wanted said?

To be sure, the grieving mother and father desire (and many would say deserve) an answer from God on the subject. However, the Bible does not provide a single, declarative statement on the subject. The matter is a natural and virtually unavoidable subject. The magnitude of the situation calls for our most careful and faithful study of God’s Word to discern what He has revealed.

To honor the Scripture and to comfort the anguish of a parent’s heart, we must avoid pat sentimentality and search the Scriptures for truth. It is the Scripture and the truth they contain that where we find our true comfort. A multitude of women (and men) in our immediate vicinity who have lost children through abortion, miscarriage, Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, accident or physical tragedy. They are waiting for an answer.

A Sure Foundation

Our answer from Scripture begins with some simple but very important presuppositions:

1. Life begins at conception.
2. Every life conceived is a person, not a fetus or a blob of tissue. (See **Psalm 139**)
3. Every person has a soul.
4. Therefore, any death that occurs after the very moment of conception is the death of a person.

¹ John MacArthur, *Safe in the Arms of God: Truth from Heaven about the Death of a Child* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003), 67.

Common Answers

In the search for truth, a wide variety of options have been presented to answer this difficult question. If we examine them, we begin to see the shortcomings.

The Age of Accountability

A familiar term that has arisen is the “age of accountability.” The Bible makes absolutely no reference to such an age of accountability. It does not even imply one.² The “age of accountability” is not necessarily *unbiblical*. It is just not a clear teaching of the Scriptures. While it is not a biblical term, the truth it expresses is biblical.

However, a better term would be the “condition of accountability.” We are not discussing a certain age (say, 6 years old) but a condition one must be in to be saved in the context of infancy. This condition is defined as “one who has not reached sufficient, mature understanding to comprehend convincingly the issues of law, grace, sin, and salvation.”³ This would include the infant in the womb, the infant at birth, a small child, and a mentally handicapped individual at any age.

In fact, a belief in an “age of accountability” is an assumption based on the premise that children are born safe (or saved, innocent). This theory is then used to explain what happens when a child later “becomes lost” once he or she is able to discern right and wrong.

However, the Bible informs us that God views the infant as a sinner before any actual sin is ever committed. Alcorn says that “if God was willing to tolerate say, a total of 5,000 sins but no more, then you could make the case that children who die young may not have reached their limit and therefore are qualified for heaven. Scripture says no such thing. Children are not qualified for heaven. They are not innocent.”⁴

Therefore, instead of saying a child is born innocent (no matter how cute and adorable they look) and stays saved until he sins and becomes lost, we must believe that a child is born a sinner and will remain lost until God saves that child. This leads naturally to a second common thought regarding the salvation of infants.

The Sinlessness of Infants

Some believe that infants go to heaven because there is nothing in them or done by them that merits condemnation. In other words, some believe that babies are born in a state of moral neutrality. They do not possess a sin nature until they actually commit a real sin (in thought or deed). Therefore, infants go to heaven because they are not condemnable. If you know theology, you recognize this position as Pelagianism.

² Randy Alcorn, “Do Infants go to Heaven when they Die?” <http://www.epm.org/articles/infant.html> (accessed June 14, 2007).

³ John MacArthur, “The Salvation of Babies Who Die: Part 1” <http://www.ondoctrines.com/2mac0142.htm> (accessed June 13, 2007).

⁴ *Ibid.* This lack of innocence rests entirely in the fact that all humans are born with a sin nature. However, it must also be understood that babies are, in some sense, innocent in that they are not culpable in the same way as those whose sins are willful or premeditated.

Several scriptures contradict this view so readily that it is amazing that anyone believes it at all:

- Psalm 51:5 - Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, And in sin my mother conceived me.
- Psalm 58:3 - The wicked are estranged from the womb; These who speak lies go astray from birth.
- Genesis 8:21 - The intent of man's heart is evil from his youth.
- Job 15:14-16 - What is man, that he should be pure, Or he who is born of a woman, that he should be righteous?
- Matthew 7:16-18 – A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit.
- Ephesians 2:3 - Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.

The Bible teaches that all people are born with a sinful nature. The theological term for this condition is *original sin*. This truth explains why no human needs to be taught *how* to sin. A recent study in England somehow managed to surprise some scientists.⁵ The psychology department at the University of Portsmouth studied fifty infants and young children and came to the conclusion that infants begin to lie as early as six months old. It was previously thought that children had to be at least four years old to do something so complex as fabricate such dishonesty. However, these sociologists identified seven categories of deception, such as fake crying and pretend laughing, and, later, trying to cover up bad behavior.

So, sinning comes naturally to all of us; we are hard-wired that way. All humans, who at one time were in the womb, are born as sinners. We are born with an inherent desire and bent towards sin. We do not become sinners once we sin for the first time. We commit a sin because we are born sinful creatures.

This also explains why infants die in the first place – the very fact that infants die indicates that the “disease of sin” is present in their bodies.

This condition is one of the most debated but at the same time the most easily verified. Do you *any* individual who didn't repeat Adam's defiance of God? If Pelagianism were true, we should expect at least a few people to grow into sinlessness.

Yet, we know that is not true, both from experience and Scripture (Romans 3:10-23). We cannot base our hope for the salvation of infants on the theory that babies are conceived or born morally neutral.

⁵ Richard Gray, “Babies Not as Innocent as they Pretend,” <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/earth/main.jhtml?xml=/earth/2007/07/01/scibaby101.xml> (accessed August 6, 2007).

Salvation by God's Omnibenevolence

Some well-meaning individuals believe or teach that God, who is love, would never do anything as horrible as to consign an infant to hell for all of eternity. However, as we have seen above, this individual has an unbiblical view of God's holiness and standards of complete righteousness, as well as a faulty view of man's utter sinfulness. This position inevitably leads to the following one.

Universalism

The immediately preceding view leads directly to another similarly false position. Some assert that infants go to heaven when they die for the simple reason that all people go to heaven when they die. No one will suffer condemnation. Again, numerous texts can be brought forth that immediately dispel this assertion:

- Matthew 7:13ff - Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. . . . Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven . . . I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; Depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.'"
- John 3:18 - He who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.
- 2 Thessalonians 1:8-9 - . . . those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus . . . will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power.

Post-Mortem Salvation

Some teach that those who die without having the opportunity to hear the gospel of Christ and make a cognitive and morally informed decision will be granted a "second chance." In fact, this would have to be considered a "first chance." This teaching is increasing in popularity today among liberal teachers.

This post-mortem salvation includes adult individuals who have never heard the gospel, as well as infants and mentally handicapped individuals of any age. As for infants, it is thought that God will bring them to a state of sufficient maturity to allow them to understand the gospel and then make an informed free-will decision.

This may seem like a comforting thought but there is no real biblical basis for believing such a thing. The Bible tells us that everyone must die and judgment follows this death (Hebrews 9:27).

On a practical level, this position offers no help to ease the anxieties of the parents – their child may still "grow up" to reject the Lord. There is no guarantee in this position.

Infant Salvation through Infant Baptism

Certain traditions in Christianity affirm baptismal regeneration. Ambrose, and later Augustine, taught that the waters of baptism are used by God to cleans the baby of

original sin and provide forgiveness for the infant. Martin Luther taught this and while we have much to thank Luther for, infant baptism is not one of them.⁶

The case for baptismal regeneration is non-existent. Furthermore, it fails to address the question of what happens to the majority of infants who die (today and in the history of the world) with the benefit of baptism.

Roman Catholic “Limbo”

Rome has attempted to address the issue of unbaptized babies by teaching of the possibility of a state of natural blessedness or happiness in which unbaptized infants experience a form of eternal peace but not the all-encompassing joy of heaven itself. This place is called “limbo” or “limbus infantum.” Rome refuses to officially affirm or deny this teaching yet the teaching continues to be presented.

Salvation by Believing Parents

Some appeal to 1 Corinthians 7:14-16 to teach that infants of believing parents are granted salvation on the basis of their parents’ profession of faith. That particular interpretation of that passage is strained, at best. If that interpretation is correct, they you must believe that adult spouses are forever saved, not because of their faith in Christ, but because of their spouse’s trust in Christ.

Infants are Saved (if they are Elect)

Some reformed theologians state that the matter is solely determined in the mind of God. If the infant is of the elect, he or she will live forever in heaven. If the infant is not of the elect, he or she is condemned. Those who hold this position seek to affirm the clear and undeniable doctrine of divine election.⁷ At the same time, they are very careful to go no farther than the undeniably clear statements of Scripture. They place their hope in the perfect goodness, mercy, and justice of God.

That should be good enough for all of us. Yet, there is another position that goes just a bit farther.

All Who Die in Infancy are Saved

This view states that all those who die in infancy (as well as the mentally handicapped) are chosen by God for salvation.

Which Position is Correct?

From the positions mentioned above, only one is correct. The correct position on infant salvation must be established on the basis of the following:⁸

⁶ Luther most likely failed to break completely with his former beliefs at this point as a former Roman Catholic.

⁷ Al Mohler, “The Salvation of Little Ones: Do Infants who Die Go to Heaven?” January 17, 2005 <http://www.covenantnews.com/mohler050117.htm> (accessed June 13, 2007).

⁸ Ronald Nash, *When a Baby Dies: Answers to Comfort Grieving Parents* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 59.

1. **No theory of infant salvation can be biblically sound if it ignores the way original sin leaves all humans (including infants and the mentally incapable) both guilty and totally (radically) depraved.** Any theory that refuses to take original sin and total depravity into account is wrong. All people are conceived and born as sinners and in desperate need of salvation. While we may say that infants are “innocent,” we do not mean they are not tainted by the fallenness or guilt that we all inherit from Adam (Romans 5:1-19).⁹
2. **If deceased infants and the mentally incapable are to be saved, their salvation can only be because of the sovereign grace of God.**¹⁰ The Bible clearly teaches that the Father chooses persons to salvation from eternity past and that salvation is solely based upon *His grace alone*. MacArthur says there is no better illustration of salvation by grace alone than the salvation of a deceased infant.
3. **If deceased infants and the mentally incapable are to be saved, their salvation must be on the basis of the perfect atonement of Christ on the cross.** The Bible clearly teaches that Jesus is the only way anyone is ever saved.
4. **If deceased infants and the mentally incapable are to be saved, their salvation must occur before death.**

The single view that takes all these factors into account in a satisfactory fashion is the view that all those who die in infancy are among God’s elect. The evidence is not abundant but it is significant.

Why I Believe that All Those Dying in Infancy are Saved

For some, the simple statement, “Your baby is in heaven” is sufficient. For others, an explanation of the “why” is needed. The belief that all babies go to heaven upon death must be based on more than speculation and a hope that it is true. Does the Bible give evidence for this teaching? I think it does. For those individuals who need the “why,” I offer the following truths.

The Response to General Revelation

In Romans 1:20, Paul says people who are recipients of general revelation are “without excuse.” General revelation is God’s revealing of Himself in a general way (i.e., nature).

⁹ MacArthur, *Safe in the Arms of God*, 69.

¹⁰ It has been said repeatedly through history and multiple times in the last few years that those who hold to Reformed Theology (Calvinism) believe that all babies go to hell when they die. This is an incorrect statement and must be made either out of woeful ignorance or purposeful attempt at building a straw-man in order to spread deception. I pray it is the former. Charles Spurgeon was charged with holding this belief and responded to the claim by saying, “It has been wickedly, lyingly, and slanderously said of Calvinists, that we believe that some little children perish. Those who make the accusation know that their charge is false. I know of no exception, but we all hope and believe that all persons dying in infancy are elect. . . . they who have fallen asleep in infancy have not perished, but have been numbered with the chosen of God, and so have entered into eternal rest. We have never taught the contrary, and when the charge is brought, I repudiate it and say, “*You* may have said so, *we* never did, and you know we never did. If you dare to repeat the slander again, let the lie stand in scarlet on your very cheek if you be capable of a blush.” We have never dreamed of such a thing. With very few and rare exceptions, so rare that I never heard of them except from the lips of slanderers, we have never imagined that infants dying as infants have perished, but we have believed that they enter into the paradise of God.” See C.H. Spurgeon, “Infant Salvation,” September 29, 1861, <http://www.biblebb.com/files/spurgeon/0411.htm> (accessed August 8, 2007).

We might imply from this that those who are not recipients of general revelation are therefore not accountable for their response to this revelation. In other words, an infant or a mentally handicapped child/adult do not possess either the capacity to receive the general revelation or the capacity to respond to it.

The Knowledge of Good and Evil

There are texts that appear to imply that infants do not know good or evil and therefore lack the ability to make morally informed choices. For instance, in Deuteronomy 1:34-40, we read that:

Then the LORD . . . was angry . . . saying, “Not one of these men, this evil generation, shall see the good land which I swore to give your fathers, except Caleb [and] Joshua . . . Moreover, your little ones who you said would become a prey, 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. But as for you, turn around and set out for the wilderness by the way to the Red Sea.”

The fact that these children were able to enter Canaan does not prove infant salvation but it does seem to show that God treated them in a special way. They were exempt from judgment. They were not judged for their fathers’ sins.

A similar situation is presented in the familiar account of Jonah. Jonah desires the city of Nineveh be destroyed but God sent Jonah as His instrument to present the Gospel to that people. In Jonah 4:11, God tells the angry prophet that “Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand, as well as many animals?”

There were people in that great city who received compassion because they were incapable of understanding truth.

One more example: In Jeremiah 19:4-5, the prophet condemns the inhabitants of Jerusalem for a particularly heinous act:

“Because they have forsaken Me and have made this an alien place and have burned sacrifices in it to other gods, that neither they nor their forefathers nor the kings of Judah had ever known, and because they have filled this place with the blood of the innocent and have built the high places of Baal to burn their sons in the fire as burnt offerings to Baal, a thing which I never commanded or spoke of, nor did it ever enter My mind.”

Who are the “innocent” here? The innocent are the children sacrificed as a burnt offering to a pagan god. Innocent – not sinless, but innocent.¹¹ These are not children of believers

¹¹ See Footnote 4. Earlier we said that children are not born innocent. The distinction seems to be in this condition of accountability.

but children of idolaters. However, they were not held as guilty along with their parents for their parents' rejection of God.

The implications are staggering. Revelation tells us that there will be people from every tribe and nation and tongue worshipping around the throne in heaven. This includes people from Muslim countries, Buddhist countries, Hindu countries and outright godless countries. However, there are many people groups who have never heard the gospel. While the adults are condemned because of their rejection of natural revelation (Romans 1), their infants and young children will join in singing songs of praise.

God's Ownership of Children

In Ezekiel 16, the prophet is also giving an indictment against Israel. God depicts Israel as a young girl he has "adopted" who is now rebelling against that gracious act. Read these words carefully:

Thus says the Lord GOD to Jerusalem, "As for your birth, on the day you were born your navel cord was not cut, nor were you washed with water for cleansing; you were not rubbed with salt or even wrapped in cloths. No eye looked with pity on you to do any of these things for you, to have compassion on you. Rather you were thrown out into the open field, for you were abhorred on the day you were born. When I passed by you and saw you squirming in your blood, I said to you while you were in your blood, 'Live!' . . .

"But you trusted in your beauty and played the harlot because of your fame, and you poured out your harlotries on every passer-by who might be willing. . . . Moreover, you took your sons and daughters whom you had borne to Me and sacrificed them to idols to be devoured. Were your harlotries so small a matter? You slaughtered *My children* and offered them up to idols by causing them to pass through the fire."

Whose children? God said, "MY children."

David's Understanding of the Death of His Children

The story of the death of King David's son in 2 Samuel 12:15-23 is the passage that most refer to first when trying to understand this issue. In this account, the first-born son of David and Bathsheba was struck by the Lord with illness and died. In the seven days before the death, David fasted and prayed that "the Lord may be gracious to me, that the child may live" (v. 22).

However, the baby did not live. After hearing the news, David washed himself, ate some food, and worshipped (v. 20). His behavior puzzled those around him and they asked him about his reaction to such devastating news. David responded that the child "has died; why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I will go to him, but he will not return to me" (v. 23).

What did David mean when he said, “I shall go to him?” If this refers only to the fact that David will follow the baby in death, one wonders why David would find such comfort in something so obvious and futile. Yet, David is able to resume his normal life because of the hope that he will “go to him.” David derived hope from a truth he held that he would one day be reunited with his son. This implies that (at the very least) this infant was saved and in the presence of the Lord.

Compare this to the death of another of David’s sons, Absalom (2 Samuel 18). Absalom was leading a rebellion against his father when he died (18:9) by getting his head and hair caught in a low-hanging tree. When David heard of his death, he “was deeply moved and went up to the chamber over the gate and wept. And thus he said as he walked, ‘O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!’” (18:33).

David *stopped* mourning when the baby died. David *began* mourning when Absalom, his grown son, died. What was the difference? He knew the baby was in the presence of the Lord and he knew that Absalom was not. With the first, there was the hope of a reunion. With the second, there would be eternal separation.

The Basis of Judgment and Condemnation

There is consistent testimony in Scripture that people are saved by grace but are judged by their works (sins). In Revelation 20:11-13, John sees a horrible scene:

¹¹ Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them.

¹² And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds. ¹³ And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds.

This is the Great White Throne judgment of all the dead outside of Christ. Christ sits as final arbiter of their eternal destinies, just as he said in John 5:22. All judgment has been given to Christ and He will judge righteously and justly. The judgment for those who are in Christ has already been made – at the cross!

Scripture always connects eternal condemnation to the sinner’s deeds or works. Adam’s sin (or original sin) explains why our inability to respond to God without His sovereign work of regeneration. However, the Bible clearly tells us that we will not have to answer for Adam’s sin – we will be punished for our own (if we die without Christ). The greatest work of a lost person is his or her unbelief (see John 8:21-24 and John 3:36).

Infants who die have never had anything written in this book of records because they have never consciously committed wrongful deeds. In other words, eternal judgment is always based on a conscious rejection of divine revelation (either in creation, conscience,

or Christ) and willful disobedience.

The Logic behind Eternal Punishment

If an 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 for its suffering. . . . It would know suffering but it would have no understanding of the reason for its suffering. . . . the very essence of penalty would be absent and justice would be disappointed of its vindication. Such an infant could feel that it was in hell, but it could not explain, to its own conscience, why it was there.”¹²

Evidence of Regeneration in the Womb

The Bible seems to clearly tell us that at least some infants were regenerate even in the womb. This means that even if these infants had died in infancy they would have been saved. This provides at least a theoretical basis for considering the wider implications of such a previous act. These texts are:

- Jeremiah 1:5 - Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, And before you were born I consecrated you; I have appointed you a prophet to the nations.
- Luke 1:15 - For he will be great in the sight of the Lord; and he will drink no wine or liquor, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb.

Jesus’ Opinion and Treatment of Children

In Matthew 19:13-15, we see a dear picture of Jesus interacting with small children. In this scene, the Lord says, “Let the children alone, and do not hinder them from coming to Me; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” There are differences of opinion on what Jesus meant by those words. Some say that Jesus mean that if one wishes to be saved, he or she must be as trusting as children. Others say that Jesus was merely describing the kind of people who enter heaven. However, some say that Jesus was implying that these very children (and others like them) were recipients of the grace needed to enter heaven and enjoy eternal life.¹³

God’s Character

While entirely subjective in nature, we must ask the question: Given our understanding of the character of God as presented in Scripture, does He appear as the kind of God who would eternally condemn infants on no other ground than that of Adam’s transgression?

Conclusion of the Matter

While not all of the above points are equally strong or convincing, I do see sufficient biblical evidence to believe in the salvation of those dying in infancy. I do not say this because infants are free from sin or that they have somehow merited God’s forgiveness in

¹² R.A. Webb, *The Theology of Infant Salvation* (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1981), 288-280.

¹³ It must be noted, however, that if Jesus knew these particular children were already saved, it implies that all of these children would die in their infancy. Is that credible?

anyway. I say this because I believe that God has sovereignly chosen them for eternal life and regenerated their souls, just as He does for anyone else who is ever to be saved.

Practical Advice

It is my hope that the above information has provided a biblical basis for a belief in the salvation of deceased infants (and the mentally incapable). If you have ever had to endure such an ordeal, I pray that you find comfort in knowing that your child is in the presence of God and you, if you are a believer, will live forever along with him or her in heaven.

For those of us who have never gone through such a hard time, we need to know how to comfort others in their time of great distress. Much damage has been done by well-meaning but ill-prepared individuals. Several websites exist to assist people in comforting loved ones through this tragedy. The following are adapted from several of those sites.

What NOT to Say

Most people are very uncomfortable with death, especially when an infant or child is involved. The pain for the parents and siblings is indescribable and almost unbearable. The last thing they need is to hear certain things like the following.

Do NOT say:

- **“Did you . . .?”** In trying to ask for the cause of death, you are implying that the mother or father did something wrong or harmful to their baby.
- **“Well, you're still young. You can always have another baby.”** This makes the incorrect assumption that another baby can simply replace the dead one, like a pet goldfish. This is the equivalent of saying, “Better luck next time.” The deceased baby is special and will never be forgotten or replaced. Ask yourself how you would feel if you lost your spouse and someone said, “That's too bad. On the other hand, there are lots of other women/men out there and you'll surely get married again.”
- **“At least . . .”** To say “At least the baby didn't suffer” or “At least you still have your other children” denies the validity of the parents' grief.
- **“I can imagine (or know) how you feel.”** If you haven't lost a child, you can't possibly know how the mother or father are feeling.
- **“It's a blessing in disguise.”** You might think you are comforting the parents by insinuating that the baby was probably deformed or destined for a rough life of medical hardship. No matter your motives, this is not a comforting comment. Furthermore, it perpetuates the fallacy that human life is only valuable when it comes in a perfect package.
- **“Thank God it wasn't a full-term baby.”** The human spirit has no “size.” The person created in the image and likeness of God is fully there from conception — regardless of the size or capabilities of the body and mind.
- **“At least you didn't 'know' him.”** Parents will be in agony if they didn't get to do things like hold or nurse or kiss their baby. A mother's arms ache to hold their infant and her breasts are full of milk for them and the feelings of deprivation and

missing their babies is so intense. They can't imagine you'd believe it is easier for them this way.

- **“Gee, I know — I'm having a rough time right now, too.”** The last thing they need right now is to hear about your problems — unless someone you love just died, also. However, don't compare the loss of their baby to your loss of a parent, a spouse or a pet. The death of a baby is different from other losses and must be viewed separately.
- **“Well, you just have to forget this ever happened and get on with life.”** They are now different people with new thoughts, dreams, aspirations, values, and beliefs. Losing their baby has irrevocably changed them. Their life will never be the same, and they would not want it to be.
- **“God doesn't put you through more than they can handle.”** The death of their baby will rip them apart and some days they will find it hard to function. The death of a baby is overwhelming and sometimes it takes everything they have to get out of bed and getting dressed in the morning. Furthermore, this adds to the guilt as they may think their character had something to do with the death.
- **“It's probably all for the best.”** At this point, the mother and father will have a near impossible time trying to understand how losing a baby they wanted and adored be “for the best?” It sure doesn't seem like the best possible outcome. While all that happens in the life of a believer is worked out for good (Romans 8:28), the understanding of the truth behind that statement may be years away (if not known until we arrive in Heaven ourselves).
- **“Please let me know if there's anything I can do.”** It sounds nice, but it puts the burden on the bereaved person to think of something, and then have to ask for help. At that moment, they don't know what they need but any help you are willing to give will be greatly appreciated. If you want to help, find something to do and just do it. And don't worry about being recognized for it.
- **“God needed another angel in His heavenly choir” or “God needed another flower in His garden.”** I hope you do not need to be taught how empty these pious sounding platitudes really are. *Besides, they are bereft of any biblical foundation.*

What NOT to Do

- **Don't be afraid to speak the baby's name or acknowledge the baby.** The baby did exist and is a very real part of their parent's/families lives. Don't pretend like the baby never even existed.
- **Don't think that if they have a good day their grief is over, or if they have a bad day that they need psychiatric counseling.** Grief is different from depression and must be treated as such.
- **Don't be offended if they don't want to talk.** While they may want to talk about the baby it may be to painful for them to talk about some parts of their story.
- **Don't ignore them or be scared of them.** The death of an infant is a very awkward social situation. However, being a bereaved parent is not contagious and it is a very isolated world. They need your presence, not your wise words or deep theology.

- **Don't ignore the baby or child's birthday.** These are very important dates in the family's lives and they will want them acknowledged.
- **Don't expect their grief to be over in six months (or some other predetermined period of time).** The first few years are going to be exceedingly traumatic for them. The parents will never fully "get over it." The grief may not have the same intensity but it will always be a part of them.
- **Don't have expectations of how they should be coping or tell them to move on.** Grief is different for every parent and only they themselves can start to move on when they are ready. For some this may be a year, others many years.
- **Don't say that you have been busy so that you could not call!** This has been most likely the biggest event in their life and it hurts to hear that they have been so low on your priority list that you couldn't spare five or ten minutes to call.
- **Don't expect that because the baby "is with God now" and "they are in a better place now" the parents should not be grieving.** Yes they may believe their baby is in heaven and they may be thankful for that, but their arms ache to hold them and they miss them so.
- **Don't ignore the father.** When you ask a husband how their wife is doing, don't forget to ask him how he is doing too. He also lost the baby he was eagerly awaiting. If you ignore his hurt it says to him that his pain shouldn't exist or doesn't matter.
- **Don't ignore the siblings but don't try to explain to the siblings about their baby brother or sister.** They will know something terrible has happened to them & they will be grieving in their own way. They will also be looking for reassurance that Mom and Dad will be ok and will find their strength in the Lord. It is the responsibility and privilege of the parents to teach their older children through this tragedy.
- **Don't talk on to them about another person's current pregnancy.** This can be a painful reminder of what they are wanting so much right now and sometimes it is not achievable after the death of a child or baby.

What to Do

- **Be present in the life of the grieving mother.** Joseph Bayly in his helpful book, *The Last Thing We Talk About: Help and Hope for Those Who Grieve*, shares an experience after the death of one of his children.¹⁴ He writes "I was sitting, torn by grief. Someone came and talked to me of God's dealings, of why it happened, of hope beyond the grave. He talked constantly; he said things I knew were true. I was unmoved except to wish he would go away. He finally did. Another came and sat beside me. He didn't talk. He didn't ask leading questions. He just sat beside me for an hour or more, listened when I said something, answered briefly, prayed simply, and left. I was moved. I was comforted. I hated to see him go."
- **Make yourself available to listen.** Don't make the mistake of thinking you have to say something profound. Most of the time, the gift of listening, your tears and/or a warm hug can help more than anything you could possibly say.

¹⁴ Haddon Robinson, *Grief: Comfort for Those Who Grieve and Those Who Want to Help* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House Publishers, 1996), 26.

- **If you must ask questions, ask appropriate questions.** It helps to ask questions like “What type of baby was he?” or “Can you show me some pictures of her?” The SIDS parent is often in a haze after the death, but they do remember the little things.
- **Volunteer to help in some tangible way and just do it.** If you can help with funeral arrangements, returning clothes, driving to support meetings, and just handing over wads of tissue as needed, you are helping. Think of one or two specific things that you could do — bring a meal, watch other children for several hours, do the laundry, run errands, take care of yard work — then call and ask if you could do so. Even small gestures of practical help can be very comforting.
- **If you can't help, keep in touch.** Just be there. The most helpful responses, whether verbal or nonverbal, are those responses that allow the parents to cry, express anger, talk about guilt, and vent hostility.
- **Send a personal note or card** — but avoid the temptation to "preach" or find a reason for the miscarriage. If you've experienced a miscarriage, however, sharing that fact can communicate the message, "You're not alone, and I understand." A few words validating the parents' loss can be very comforting. One lady relates that “My next-door neighbor brought over a fruit basket, a warm and funny novel, and a note that simply said, ‘I'm so sorry.’” One lady at Western Avenue who suffered a miscarriage told me that “The one thing that meant so much to me was when one couple purchased Bibles in memory of my baby.” Make a donation to a favorite charity in memory of the child. Or, if there is a burial, make a donation toward a headstone or other related expenses. Another wrote “I have a collection of mementos of Andrew. It's primarily filled with notes and cards that people sent—which even now, almost 10 years later, are very meaningful to me.”
- **Pray for the grieving parent(s).** Ask, "How can I pray for you right now?" Then remember to pray — and, ideally, keep up with their prayer needs on a regular basis for the first few months.
- **Send a note or flowers at the time the baby would have been born.** This is something seldom thought of, but can be very comforting at a time, months later, that usually brings renewed grief.
- **Be there for the father and siblings.** While a miscarriage or death naturally impacts the mother the most, the baby's father and other children in the family (if any) should not be forgotten. They may be struggling with their own feelings of shock, confusion and loss. Simple questions like “How are you doing? Do you want to talk?” can let them know they're not forgotten. A phone call, a note, an invitation to have coffee or get ice cream will convey the message that “I know you've experienced a loss, too — and I care!”

CONCLUSION

When we look into the casket or grave of a dead infant, we dare not place our hope in the false promises of unbiblical theology. We do not lean on the instability of emotional sentimentalism. We find no relief in the cold analysis of human logic. We are not consoled by the cowardly retreat of agnosticism or ambiguity. Instead, we place our trust and hope in Christ and trust Him to be faithful to His Word. Al Mohler writes that we

know that heaven will be filled with those who never grew to maturity on earth, but in heaven will greet us completed in Christ. Let us resolve by grace to meet them there.¹⁵

RESOURCES TO PURSUE

Joseph Bayly, *The Last Thing We Talk About: Help and Hope for Those Who Grieve*

Bayly lost three children to death and provides helpful perspective.

Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* and *This Incomplete One: Words Occasioned by the Death of a Young Person*

Wolterstorff offers a sensitive account of a parent's heartbreak and healing after the death of his 25-year old son.

Harold Oosterveen, *Too Early Frost: A Father's Account of Losing a Son*

Oosterveen reflects on the agony his family experienced in losing a child to cancer.

John MacArthur, *Safe in the Arms of God: Truth from Heaven about the Death of a Child*

Ronald Nash, *When a Baby Dies: Answers to Comfort Grieving Parents*

These two books provide the biblical basis for believing that a baby goes to heaven after death.

¹⁵ Mohler, "The Salvation of the 'Little Ones'"

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In my study of the Bible, I have come to realize two important propositions:

1. The Bible tells us everything we *need* to know.
2. The Bible does *not* tell us everything we *want* to know.

The words of Deuteronomy 29:29 and 2 Timothy 3:15-17¹⁶ provide sufficient proof for the first proposition. It is the second statement that provides trouble for many believers.

We see such an incident in the life of Peter. In John 21, Jesus says something to Peter that greatly disturbs the disciple: “Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to gird yourself and walk wherever you wished; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will gird you, and bring you where you do not wish to go” (John 21:18). John goes on to clarify the statement, writing that Jesus said this to signify “by what kind of death [Peter] would glorify God” (John 21:19).

This sudden revelation of his impending death raised some questions in Peter’s mind. The Bible tells us that “Peter, turning around, saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them” (John 21:20). He then asked Jesus “Lord, and what about this man?” Jesus famously answered, “If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow Me!” (John 21:22).

Peter *wanted* to know John’s end but did he *need* to know? Jesus did not think so. Basically, Jesus told Peter, “You have your Category 1 information. Don’t burden yourself with Category 2 questions.”

There are many questions we have that the Bible simply refuses to give a clear answer. I have been asked about the following at several points in my ministry:

- Will our pets be in heaven?
- Is there life on other planets? If so, will they be saved? If so, how?
- Did Adam and Eve have bellybuttons?

To find out to which category your question belongs, ask yourself these two related questions: (1) Is my question directly addressed in Scripture? (2) Why do I need to know this? If your question is addressed by Scripture, then you know that God put the answer in the Bible because you needed to know it. If it is not directly addressed in Scripture, then you must ask why you feel you need that information. An honest answer to Question #2 will usually tell us that we really do not need to know the answer.

With this in mind, there does seem to be one question that gets asked often: “Do babies who die in infancy go to heaven?” This is a question most people want to know and

¹⁶ Deut 29:29 – “The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law.” 2 Tim 3:15-17 – “. . . from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.”

certain people need to know. There is no single place in Scripture where the answer is put forth in a clear and concise manner. However, in studying the Scriptures, I believe God has given us enough information to be able to answer that question.

We must also be in agreement that our answer to this difficult question be informed totally by the Scriptures. Many statements are made to grieving mothers and fathers that either serve no purpose whatsoever or, even worse, heap even more guilt and anguish on these suffering individuals. Have you ever been in such a situation? What did you say? Do you know what you would say right now?

A great variety of answers have been posited by well-meaning individuals through the years: