

Where do Children Go who Die in Infancy?

By Rev. Tom Aicken

Where children go who die in infancy is, understandably, a subject of very special interest and of ongoing concern to grieving parents who have ever lost such a child. This is a time in their lives when their church needs to reach out to them in love and seek to minister to them, gently and patiently, with comfort that can be found only in the Word of God. We do live in a fallen world, of course, and we must acknowledge that such tragedies do happen even in Christian homes. How we face these afflictions and learn to endure the grief is itself a matter of great importance.

Many people think that all children who die in infancy go to heaven. This was the view of Charles Hodge, one of the best known and most respected theologians of the nineteenth century. Others think that all such children of Christian parents go to heaven, and are even persuaded that those parents can find this comfort held out to them in the covenant of grace. I want to be quick to point out that either one or the other of these two views may very well be right, but it would be difficult to defend either one from Holy Scripture because the Word of God is not as clear on this teaching as some would have us to believe.

Attempts have been made to defend both views on the basis of 2 Sam. 12:23, where David said of his infant son who had just died, "I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me." Yet, clearly, he is talking about the inevitability of death in this passage, not the place to which the child is to be raised after the resurrection of Christ from the tomb. We find a similar thing in 1 Sam. 28:19, where Samuel speaks from the dead and says to Saul, "tomorrow you and your sons will be with me." It simply means that Saul and his sons would die, would assemble in the place of the dead to await the resurrection, not that they would ascend to heaven the following day. I know, it is easy to read into these passages what we would like to find there, yet the fact remains that the Lord our God has revealed to us only what He would have us to know, what He would have us to store up in our hearts and to live out in our lives, and that He has deliberately kept concealed many other things that we might like to know, and even feel we should know, but which things it has not served the purpose of the Lord to tell us (Deut. 29:29).

For this reason, it is better to say in the words of the Westminster Confession of Faith, 10:3, “Elect infants, dying in infancy, are regenerated and saved by Christ through the Spirit, who works when and where and how He pleases. So also are all other elect persons who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the word.” Notice, it is not that infants cannot be saved through the work of the Holy Spirit, but that such a blessing comes about, not by regular but by special means. Yet the point here is that, since we do not know who the elect are – and we cannot know, for we are not told – we cannot state with any certainty which infants, or even how many, are bound for heaven when they die.

Does this mean that we can give no comfort to grieving parents whose infants have died? We can indeed comfort them, but that comfort is to be sought from the character of God – not from what He has *not* revealed, but from what He *has* revealed, especially about Himself – from the fact that He is righteous in all His ways and gracious in all His works (Ps. 145:17), from the fact that He is faithful, unchangeable and never fails to do what is right. This is the same comfort that may be given to all believers, whatever afflictions they may have suffered, and all that is required to take in this comfort is the faith to believe God, to trust Him to do what He has told us He will do, and to keep trusting Him even when He has not told us what is coming next, or how it will turn out, and we scratch our heads because it does not make any sense to us at the time.

Abraham, remember, believed God; this was what distinguished him and was the means of his being declared righteous before God (Gen. 15:6). He did not understand everything either (Heb. 11:17-19), but, still, he believed God. So, we are to believe Him also, to trust Him even when He has not told us the outcome of our trials beforehand, when we do not see their purpose and wonder how they could ever possibly help us. I am not saying that this will be easy – it never is – but it is the difficulty of a trial, and what we learn of the Lord’s presence and power in the midst of it, that makes the affliction profitable and our faith stronger (Rom. 5:3,4). Of this we may be sure, believer, that when at last we come before the Lord, faultless to stand before the presence of His glory and with exceeding joy, we will not think ourselves to have the least cause to be disappointed or want to charge Him with any wrongdoing. We will praise Him, rather, for everything He has done, for all His secret counsel at last revealed, so even now let us learn to commit everything to Him who judges righteously and can never do wrong!

