

Infant Salvation

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Biblical Doctrine | *The Sword & Trowel*

November 2007

'Is it well with the child? And she answered, It is well' (2 Kings 4.26).

The Shunammite woman was first asked by Gehazi, whether it was well with herself. She was mourning over a lost child, and yet she said, 'It is well.' She felt that the trial would surely be blessed.

Then Gehazi asked, 'Is it well with thy husband?' He was old and stricken in years, and was ripening for death, yet she said, 'Yes, it is well.' Then came the question about her child, which was dead at home, 'Is it well with the child?' Surely this enquiry would renew her grief. Yet she said, 'It is well,' perhaps so answering because she had faith that soon her child would be restored to her, or rather because she was persuaded that whatever might have become of its spirit, it was safe in the keeping of God, happy beneath the shadow of his wings. Therefore, not fearing that it was lost, and having no suspicion whatever that it was cast away from the place of bliss, she said, 'Yes, the child is dead, but it is well.'

Let every mother and father know assuredly that it is well with the child, if God has taken it away from you in its infant days. You never heard its declaration of faith; it was not capable of such a thing. It was not baptised into the Lord Jesus Christ. It was not capable of giving that 'answer of a good conscience towards God'; nevertheless, you may rest assured that it is well with the child, well in a higher and a better sense than it is well with yourselves. The child is 'well' without limitation, without exception, infinitely and eternally.

Perhaps you will say, 'What reasons have we for believing that it is well with the child?' Before I enter upon that I would make one observation. 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 cannot even dare to hope, though I would wish to do so, that they ignorantly misrepresent us. They wickedly repeat what has been denied a thousand times, what they know is not true.

In Calvin's advice to Knox, he interprets the second commandment, 'Shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me,' as referring to generations, and hence he seems to teach that dying infants who have had believing ancestors, no matter how remotely, are saved. This would certainly take in the whole race.

As for modern Calvinists, I know of no exception, but we all hope and believe that all persons dying in infancy are elect. Dr Gill, who has been looked upon in late times as being a very standard of Calvinism, not to say of ultra-Calvinism, himself never hints for a moment the supposition that any infant has perished. He affirms that it is a dark and mysterious subject, but states that it is his belief, and he thinks he has Scripture to warrant it, that 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.' 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.

First, I shall endeavour to explain the way in which we believe infants are saved; secondly, give reasons

for so believing; and then, thirdly, seek to bring out a practical use of the subject.

First of all, *the way in which we believe infants to be saved.*

Some ground the idea of the eternal blessedness of the infant upon its innocence. We do no such thing; we believe that all infants fell in the first Adam, 'For...in Adam all die.' All Adam's posterity, whether infant or adult, were represented by him – he stood for them all, and when he fell, he fell for them all.

There was no exception made in the covenant of works made with Adam as to infants dying. Therefore, as they were included in Adam, though they have not sinned after the similitude of Adam's transgression, they have original guilt. They are 'born in sin and shapen in iniquity; in sin do their mothers conceive them'. David says this of himself, and (by inference) of the whole human race.

If infants are to be saved, it is not because of any natural innocence. They must enter Heaven by the very same way that we do; they must be received in the name of Christ, 'For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid.' There is no different foundation for the infant than that which is laid for the adult.

Equally, it is far from our minds to believe that infants go to Heaven through baptism. When children are taught that in their baptism they are made the children of God, and inheritors of the kingdom of Heaven, this is as base a lie as ever was forged in hell, or uttered beneath the canopy of Heaven. Our spirit sinks at the fearful errors which have crept into the church, through the one little door of infant sprinkling.

No, children are not saved because they are baptised. The child is saved, if snatched away by death, just as we are.

On what ground, then, do we believe the child to be saved? We believe it to be as lost as the rest of mankind, and as truly condemned by the sentence which said, 'In the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.' It is saved because it is elect. In the compass of election, in the Lamb's book of life, we believe there shall be found written millions of souls who are only shown briefly on earth, and then stretch their wings for Heaven.

They are saved, too, because they were redeemed by the precious blood of Jesus Christ. He who shed his blood for all his people, bought those dying in infancy with the same price with which he redeemed their parents, and therefore are they saved because Christ was Sponsor for them, and suffered in their stead.

They are saved, also, by regeneration, for, 'except a man' – the text does not mean exclusively an adult man, but a being of the human race – 'except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.' No doubt, in some mysterious manner the Spirit of God regenerates the infant soul, so that it enters into glory made meet to be a partaker of the inheritance of the saints in light.

That such regeneration is possible is proved from Scripture. John the Baptist was filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb. We believe, therefore, that even before the intellect can work, God, by the mysterious agency of his Holy Spirit, may create the infant soul a new creature in Christ Jesus, enabling it to enter into the rest which remaineth for the people of God.

By election, redemption and regeneration, the child enters into glory. If we did not suppose that dying infants were saved in the same way as adults, it would be necessary to suppose that God's justice could be set aside, and that his plan of salvation could be altered to suit their case.

Secondly, the reasons why we thus think infants are saved. We ground our conviction about infant

salvation very much upon the goodness of the nature of God. We say that the opposite doctrine that some infants perish and are lost, is altogether repugnant to the idea which we have of him whose name is Love. If we had a god whose name was Moloch; if God were an arbitrary tyrant, without benevolence or grace, we could imagine some infants being cast into hell. But our God, who heareth the young ravens when they cry, certainly will find no delight in the shrieks and cries of infants cast away from his presence.

We read of God that he is so tender that he would not have the mouth of the ox muzzled when treading out the corn. He cares for the bird upon the nest, and would not have the mother bird killed while sitting upon its nest with its little ones. He made ordinances and commands even to protect irrational creatures.

Shall we believe with such universal goodness as his, that he would cast away the infant soul? I say it would be so contrary to all that we have ever read or ever believed of him, that our faith would stagger before a revelation which should display a fact so singularly exceptional to the tenor of his other deeds.

We have learned humbly to submit our judgements to his will, and we dare not criticise or accuse the Lord of all. He is just; let him do as he may! Whatever he reveals we will accept! But he never has, and I think he never will, require of us so desperate a stretch of faith as to see goodness in the eternal misery of an infant cast into hell.

You remember when Jonah – petulant, quick-tempered Jonah – would have Nineveh perish, God gave as the reason why Nineveh should not be destroyed, that there were more than six-score thousand infants – persons who knew not their right hand from their left. If he spared Nineveh that their mortal life might be spared, do we think that their immortal souls shall be needlessly cast away?

Again, we think that eternal banishment of those dying in infancy would be utterly inconsistent with the known character of our Lord Jesus Christ. When his disciples put away the little children whom their anxious mothers brought to him, Jesus said, ‘Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven.’ By this he taught, as John Newton very properly says, that such children made up a very great part of the kingdom of Heaven.

When we consider that upon the best statistics it is calculated that more than one third of the human race die in infancy, and probably half the population of the world, if we take into calculation those districts where infanticide prevails, the saying of the Saviour derives great force indeed – ‘of such is the kingdom of heaven’.

If some remind me that the kingdom of Heaven means the dispensation of grace on earth, I answer, yes, it does, and it means the same dispensation in Heaven too. Our Lord’s words prove that infants compose a great part of his family, and that he has a love and amiableness towards the little ones.

When they shouted in the temple, ‘Hosanna!’ did he rebuke them? On the contrary he rejoiced in their shouts. Then he declared: ‘Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings thou hast perfected praise.’ And does not that text seem to say that in Heaven there shall be perfect praise rendered to God by multitudes who were here on earth – your little ones suddenly snatched away to Heaven?

I could not believe it of Jesus, that he would say to little children, ‘Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire in hell!’ I cannot conceive it possible for him as the loving and tender One, that when he shall sit to judge all nations, he should put the little ones on the left hand, and should banish them for ever from his presence.

Could he address them, and say to them, 'I was an hungred, and ye gave me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink...sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not?' How could they have treated him so? And if the main reason for damnation lies in sins of omission like these, which it was not possible for them to commit (for lack of power to perform the duty) how, then, shall he condemn and cast them away?

Furthermore, we think that the ways of grace, if we consider them, render it highly improbable (if not impossible) that infant souls should be destroyed. 'What saith the scripture?' We know that God is so abundantly gracious from such expressions as:

'The unsearchable riches of Christ'; 'God, who is rich in mercy'; 'A God full of compassion'; 'The exceeding riches of his grace'.

All these are truly applicable without exaggeration or hyperbole. We know that God is good to all, and his tender mercies are over all his works. The grace of God has sought out the greatest sinners in the world. It has not passed by the vilest of the vile. He who called himself the chief of sinners was a partaker of the love of Christ.

All manner of sin and of blasphemy have been forgiven unto man. God has been able to save unto the uttermost them that come unto him by Christ, and does it seem consistent with such grace as this that it should altogether pass by the myriads upon myriads of little ones, who wear the image of the earthy Adam, and yet never receive the image of the heavenly? I cannot conceive such a thing.

He that has tasted, and felt, and handled the grace of God, will, I think, shrink instinctively from any other doctrine than this, that infants dying as such, are most assuredly saved.

Once again, one of the strongest inferential arguments is to be found in the fact that Scripture positively states that the number of saved souls at the last will be very great. In Revelation we read of a number which no man can number. The psalmist speaks of them as numerous as dew drops from the womb of the morning. Many passages give to Abraham, as the father of the faithful, a seed as many as the stars of heaven, or as the sand on the seashore.

The virtue of precious redemption involves a great host who were redeemed. All Scripture seems to teach that Heaven will not be a narrow world, that its population will not be like a handful gleaned out of a vintage, but that Christ shall be glorified by ten thousand times ten thousand whom he hath redeemed with his blood.

Now where are all these to come from? How small a part of the map could be called Christian! Look at it. Out of that part which could be called Christian, how small a portion of them would bear the name of believer! How few could be said to have even a nominal attachment to the Church of Christ.

Out of those who do name the name of Christ, how many are hypocrites, and know not the Truth! I do not see it possible that so vast a number should enter Heaven, unless it be on the supposition that infant souls constitute the great majority.

It is a sweet belief to my own mind that there will be more saved than lost, for in all things Christ is to have the pre-eminence, and why not in this? It was the thought of a great divine that perhaps at the last, the number of the lost would not bear a greater proportion to the number of the saved, than do the number of criminals in gaols to those who are abroad in a properly conducted state. I hope it may be found to be so.

I do know that Christ will have the victory, and that as he is followed by streaming hosts, the black

prince of hell will never be able to count so many followers in his dreary train as Christ in his resplendent triumph. And if so, we must have the children saved. Chiefly though, we must have them because we feel anyhow they must be numbered with the blessed, and dwell with Christ hereafter.

Now for one or two incidental matters which occur in Scripture which seem to throw a little light also on the subject. We must not forget the case of David. His child by Bathsheba was to die as a punishment for the father's offence. David prayed and fasted and vexed his soul, but at last they told him the child was dead. He fasted no more, but he said, 'I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me.'

Now, where did David expect to go to? Why, to Heaven surely. Then his child must have been there, for he said, 'I shall go to him.' I do not hear him say the same of Absalom. He did not stand over his corpse and say, 'I shall go to him.' He had no hope for that rebellious son. Over this child it was not – 'O my son!...would God I had died for thee!' No, he could let this babe go with perfect confidence, for he said, 'I shall go to him.'

He might have said, 'I know that he hath made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and sure, and when I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I shall fear no evil, for he is with me. I shall go to my child, and in Heaven we shall be reunited with each other.'

Then you have the passage, 'Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings thou hast perfected praise.' The coming out of Egypt was a type of the redemption of the chosen seed, and you know that in that case the little ones were to go forth. Why should not children in the greater deliverance join in the song of Moses and of the Lamb?

In Ezekiel 16.21 God censures his people for having given up their little infants to Moloch, having caused them to pass through the fire, and he says of these little ones, 'Thou hast slain my children, and delivered them to cause them to pass through the fire.' So, then, they were God's children while babes.

We may therefore believe concerning all those who have fallen asleep in these early days of life, that Jesus said of them, 'These are my children.' He still carries the lambs in his bosom, as Isaiah says.

There is another passage in Scripture which may be used to show that the sin of the parents shall not necessarily be the ruin of their children. In the first chapter of Deuteronomy there had been a threatening pronounced upon the children of Israel in the wilderness, that, with the exception of Caleb and Joshua, they should never see the promised land. Nevertheless, it is added, 'Your little ones, which ye said should be a prey, and your children, which in that day had no knowledge between good and evil, they shall go in thither, and unto them will I give it, and they shall possess it.' [See endnote.]

Inasmuch as the sin of the generation in the wilderness did not shut the next generation out of Canaan, so the sin of unbelieving parents shall not necessarily be the ruin of their children, but they shall still, through God's sovereign grace and his overflowing mercy, be made partakers of the rest which he hath reserved for his people.

Note that I have not made a distinction between the children of godly and ungodly parents. If they die in infancy, I do not mind who is their father nor who is their mother, they are saved. I certainly do not endorse the theory of a Presbyterian minister who supposes that the children of godly parents will have a better place in Heaven than those who happen to be sprung from ungodly ones. I do not believe in any such thing. All of them without exception, from whosoever loins they may have sprung, will, we believe, not by baptism, not by their parents' faith, but simply as we are all

saved through the election of God, through the precious blood of Christ, through the regenerating influence of the Holy Spirit, attain to glory and immortality, and wear the image of the heavenly as they have worn the image of the earthy.

I now come to make a practical use of this doctrine. First, let it be a comfort to bereaved parents. You say it is a heavy cross that you have to carry. To have a living cross is indeed a tribulation – to have a child who is rebellious in his childhood, vicious in his youth, debauched in his manhood! Many a parent has been brought with sorrow to the grave through living children, but never through dead babes, certainly not if they were Christians and they were able to take the comfort of the apostle's words – 'Ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope.'

Do you know from what sorrows your little one has escaped? You have had enough yourself. It was born of woman; it might have been full of trouble as you are. It has escaped those sorrows; do you lament that?

Remember, too, your own sins, and the deep sorrow of repentance. Had the child lived, it would have been a sinner, and it would have known the bitterness of conviction of sin. It has escaped that and rejoices now in the glory of God.

Bereaved parents, could you for a moment see your own offspring above I think you would very speedily wipe away your tears. You might not have murmured had you received the promise that your child should have been elevated to the peerage; it has been elevated higher than that – to the peerage of Heaven. It has received the dignity of the immortals. It is robed in better than royal garments. It is more rich and more blessed than it could have been if all the crowns of earth could have been put upon its head. How can you complain? An old poet has penned a verse well fitted for an infant's epitaph:

Short was my life, the longer is my rest;
God takes those soonest whom he loveth best,
Who's born today, and dies tomorrow,
Loses some hours of joy, but months of sorrow.
Other diseases often come to grieve us,
Death strikes but once, and that stroke doth relieve us.

Your child has had that one stroke and has been relieved from all these pains, and you may say that it is supremely blessed having escaped from sin and care and woe, and with the Saviour rests. 'Happy the babe,' says Hervey, 'who –

Privileged by faith, a shorter labour and a lighter weight,
Received but yesterday the gift of breath,
Ordered tomorrow to return to death.'

Another, looking upward to the skies, says –

O blest exchange, O envied lot,
Without a conflict crowned,
Stranger to pain, in pleasure blessed
And without fame, renowned.

It is well to sing the song of triumph after we have passed the Red Sea with all its terrors; but to sing the song without the sea is glorious also! I do not know that I would prefer the lot of a child in Heaven myself. I think it is nobler to have borne the storm, and to have struggled against the wind and the rain.

I think it will be a subject of congratulation through eternity, for you and me, that we did not come so easy a way to Heaven, for it is only a pin's prick after all, this mortal life; then there is exceeding great glory hereafter.

But yet I think we may still thank God for those little ones, that they have been spared our sins, and spared our infirmities, and spared our pains, and are entered into the rest above. Thus saith the Lord unto Rachel, weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted because they were no more – 'Refrain thy voice from weeping, and thine eyes from tears: for thy work shall be rewarded, saith the Lord; and they shall come again from the land of the enemy.'

What shall we say to parents who have children who live? We have spoken of those that are dead; what shall we say of the living? I think I might say, reserve your tears, bereaved parents, for the children that live.

You may go to the little grave. You may look upon it and say, 'This my child is saved; it rests for ever beyond all fear of harm.' Then come back to those who are sitting round your table, and look from one to the other and say, 'Some of these are unsaved.' They do not know God, and some are ripening into manhood and into womanhood. It is plain to see that their hearts are like every natural heart, desperately wicked.

There is subject for weeping for you. I pray that you never cease to weep for them until they have ceased to sin. Never cease to hope for them until they have ceased to live. Never cease to pray for them until you yourself cease to breathe.

Carry them before God in the arms of faith, and do not be despondent because they are not what you want them to be. They will be won yet if you have faith in God.

Do not think that it is hopeless. He that saved you can save them. Take them one by one constantly to God's mercy-seat and wrestle with him, and say, 'I will not let thee go, except thou bless me.'

Pray, strive, wrestle, and it shall yet be your happy lot to see your household saved. This was the word which the apostle gave to the gaoler, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house.' We have had many proofs of it, for in this pool under here I have baptised not only the father and the mother, but in many cases all the children too, when one after another they have been brought by grace to put their trust in Jesus.

It should be the longing of every parent's heart to see all the children as Christ's, and numbered in the host of those who shall sing around the throne of God. We may pray in faith, for we have a promise about it. We may pray in faith, for we have many precedents in Scripture; the God of Abraham is the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob; but for this good thing he will be enquired of by the house of Israel to do it for them. Plead with him, go before him with the power of faith and earnestness, and he will surely hear you.

One word to all. A little child was saying the other day – children say strange things – 'Papa, I cannot go back again.' When he was asked what he meant, he explained that he was here, he had begun his life, and it had occurred to him that he could not cease to be. He could not go back again.

You and I may say the same. Here we are; we have grown up; we cannot go back again to that childhood in which we once were. We have therefore no door of escape there. We cannot any longer be saved as dying infants.

Good John Bunyan used to wish that he had died when he was a child. Later he hoped he might be descended from some Jew, for he had a notion that the Hebrews might be saved. That door God has closed.

Every door is closed to you and me except the one that is just in front of us, and that has the mark of the cross upon it. There is the golden knocker of prayer: do we choose to turn aside from that to find another – a gate of ceremonies, or of blood, or of birth? We shall never enter that way. There is only one true knocker! By faith I will lift it now. ‘I, the chief of sinners am, have mercy upon me!’ Jesus stands there. ‘Come in,’ saith he, and receives us to his arms, washes, clothes, glorifies us, when we come to him. Am I such a fool that I do not knock?

And now, sinner, in the name of him that liveth and was dead, and is alive for evermore, lay hold upon that knocker, lift it, and let your prayer be, ‘God be merciful to me a sinner!’

Adapted and abridged from a sermon preached on 29th September 1861

Endnote: In this case the children entered the promised land after growing to adulthood, but this passage in two ways supports the salvation of infants. First, it conveys the gracious attitude of God to those who are too young to discern good and evil, and secondly it may be seen as ‘typical’ of infants in relation to the eternal kingdom.

Additional note by the Editor

The ‘Theology Of Hope’ For Dying Infants

Many texts establish that the basis of judgement that God will use, is condemnation for actual sins committed in life. Furthermore, this judgement takes account of the light which the sinner possessed.

Romans 2 emphasises both these principles of divine judgement. If the question be asked, ‘What about those who have never heard the law of God?’ Paul answers that they have the demands of the law written in their hearts, and activated by their consciences (*Romans 2.14-15*).

Paul establishes God’s right to judge the heathen on the basis that they possess a moral consciousness written in their hearts. Thus the passage confirms that God makes actual sins committed by those with moral consciousness the basis of judgement.

This being so, it is apparent that babies whose intellectual consciousness and responsibility are not yet formed or operational, will not be judged by these standards of judgement, having only an inherited vileness and guilt, common to all. If they will not be judged according to the principles which God has revealed, we must conclude that their inherited guilt is atoned for by Christ (*1 Corinthians 15.22*). So the scripture shall be fulfilled: ‘The soul that sinneth, it shall die. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father’ (*Ezekiel 18.20*).

Some Past Worthies

The prevailing view of Calvinistic pastors in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is reflected in the discussion of this issue in the so-called Eclectic Society fraternal held in London from 1798-1814. On 19th July 1802, an entire meeting was devoted to the question – ‘What can be said respecting the salvation of infants, and virtuous heathen?’

Rev Josiah Pratt: ‘Sinners are always represented in Scripture as condemned for actual transgression (*2 Corinthians 5.10; John 5.28-29; Revelation 20.12-13*). In the last passage, “small and great” refers to station (not size). Infants have committed no personal sin.’

Rev Thomas Scott: ‘There is no doubt of the salvation of the children of believers. We are not upon so firm ground with respect to the salvation of other children. But there is much in Scripture that favours the idea. “Of such is the kingdom of heaven” carries much weight. If they partake of

Adam's punishment without actual sin, why not of the Second Adam's merit? No infants will be saved unless regenerated, but infants offer no opposition to it.

'My idea, then, is that all who have not actual sin will be partakers of regenerating grace.'

Rev John Newton: 'I believe that God's election extends to all children.'