



3. What about Children?

General question: Is God fair to children who cannot understand about Jesus?

Also asked as:

How does God treat children who die before they can understand about Jesus?
What happens to children who die before birth or never fully develop mentally?
Is there an age of spiritual accountability for children in the Bible?

Similar questions answered separately:

What happens to good people who do not believe in Jesus?
Is Jesus the only way to God?
What about people who have never heard about Jesus?
What happens to Jewish people who do not believe that Jesus is their Messiah?

A caution: Many people have experienced the loss of a young child through an early illness or accident. Others have experienced the challenges and difficulties of raising a mentally underdeveloped child. Moreover, some of these hurting parents have been wrongly judged and hurt by people in the name of religion ... and hypocritically in the name of Jesus.

The Short Answer: God loves children. He describes them as a gift, a reward, and a blessing in Psalm 127:3-5. Jesus openly welcomed children to Himself, Mark 10:13-16 and sternly warned those who would hurt them, Matthew 18:2-6 & 10. All people are judged by a standard they can understand and condemned if they violate it, Romans 2:12-14. Children who die young, or are born mentally handicapped, or are miscarried, or are aborted would obviously not reach a developmental age of being able to understand any standard of right and wrong ... and would not be judged by what they could not understand. An age of spiritual accountability for salvation is not mentioned in the Bible. However, an example of God's using an age of accountability in a non-salvation situation is found in Numbers 14:26-35. And children are capable of coming to faith in Jesus at an early age ... possibly earlier than some adults might think. However, before an age where children reach some level of understanding, they are not guilty of personal sin, not judged by some standard that they cannot understand, and if they die in that state they would go to Heaven.

The Long Answer:

What about children? This may be a question prompted by simple curiosity or may come from deep concern about a specific child. And emotional pain from a tragic experience may accompany this question. It may be asked in many ways. Do young children who die go to Heaven? How does God judge them? Is there an age of accountability in the Bible? What happens to children who never develop the ability to reason because of mental handicap, disease, accident, or death? What happens to children who die or are aborted before birth? Do the beliefs of the parents cover children? And theologically, if Jesus is the only way to God, how can such a child get to Heaven?

God loves children. *“Behold, children are a gift of the Lord, the fruit of the womb is a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, so are the children of one’s youth. How blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them,”* Psalm 127:3-5. Jesus openly welcomed young children. *“They were bringing children to Him so that He might touch them; but the disciples rebuked them. But when Jesus saw this, He was indignant and said to them, ‘Permit the children to come to Me; do not hinder them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these’ ... And He took them in His arms and began blessing them,”* Mark 10:13-16. God loves all children. God is gracious, compassionate, and full of lovingkindness. God can be trusted to deal fairly with children. The heart attitude of God toward children is revealed in the following words of Jesus, from Matthew 18:2-6 & 10. *“And He called a child to Himself and set him before them, and said, ‘Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me; but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a heavy millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea. ... See that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that their angels in heaven continually see the face of My Father who is in heaven. ... So it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones perish.’”*

Is there an age of accountability in the Bible? There is no verse or passage in the Bible that gives a specific age of spiritual accountability. However, the teaching and examples of the Bible indicate that an age of spiritual accountability does exist. Spiritual accountability is based on knowledge. Men, women, boys, and girls are judged on the basis of a standard of right and wrong that they can comprehend. They are judged by the standard written in God’s Laws ... or by the one written in their hearts, Romans 2:12-14. However, the ability to comprehend either standard is based on mental development. A child is not spiritually accountable until reaching the level of mental development where he

or she can understand the difference between right and wrong. Young babies cry when wet ... cry when hungry ... cry when cold ... and sometimes just cry. They have no concern for what their parents or others may be doing and have no concern for what time it is. Babies think only of themselves. Is that behavior selfishness? No. That is not sin because babies have not developed the mental capacity to think beyond their own comfort and needs. A baby cannot understand selfishness. A rational adult would not consider a crying baby's behavior to be sinful ... nor would God. The rate of mental development varies from child to child. Therefore, children reach the age of spiritual accountability at different physical ages. No one can predict when a specific child will reach that age.

What about mentally handicapped children? What happens to people who never develop the ability to comprehend right and wrong? Will they go to Heaven? God would treat anyone fairly who is mentally handicapped from birth, or mentally incapacitated before reaching the age of spiritual accountability. God would not condemn someone who was never able to understand. However, it is very different for someone who is mentally incapacitated at some time after reaching the age of spiritual accountability. After our ability to comprehend has developed, we are accountable for our actions and choices. God does not overlook our previous sins, nor does He excuse our previous rejection of Him, because we lose our ability to make choices.

What about a child who dies before birth? God treats children who are aborted or die before birth in the same way that He treats all children who die before reaching their age of accountability. That is true for miscarried, aborted, and stillborn children. There is no scientific evidence to indicate that human life begins at some point beyond conception. It is biased conjecture to state arbitrarily that life begins at some other time ... mid-pregnancy, upon exiting the womb, or upon breathing one's first breath. The safest assumption (scientifically, ethically, and morally) is that life begins at the moment of conception. That is consistent with David's words in Psalm 139:3-16. There is a Biblical example that illustrates that life begins at conception. Do you know what man was the first to respond with joy to Jesus? He gave testimony to his mother. Do you know who he was? I will give you a hint ... his mother's name was Elizabeth. Now you know. It was John the Baptist. However, do you know when John first responded to Jesus? It was when he was still in Elizabeth's womb. *"When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. And she cried out with a loud voice and said, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And how has it happened to me, that the mother of my Lord would come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby leaped in my womb for joy,'" Luke 1:41-44.* Unborn John (midterm in his mother's pregnancy) responded with joy at the visit of his unborn Savior (early term in Mary's pregnancy).

The response was womb to womb ... unborn child to unborn child ... life to life. There is no greater Biblical example of life beginning at conception.

An age-based accountability. One Old Testament example is not about spiritual salvation ... but it does demonstrate God's judging people with fairness based on age. Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt. They were faithless, complaining, and repeatedly grumbling. God commanded them to enter the land. But they refused. Therefore, He condemned them to wander and die in the wilderness. God did not condemn everyone. Two faithful men, Joshua and Caleb, were spared. He also spared everyone under 20 years old, Numbers 14:26-35, Deuteronomy 1:39-40. Why is 20 years the age of accountability in this situation? It is probably because that was the age of military conscription, Numbers 1:45. Those old enough to be soldiers were old enough to be accountable for their choices. This demonstrates God's fairness in using age to judge His people. However, it does not indicate that 20 is the age of spiritual accountability for children.

Can young children believe in Jesus? Yes ... and at a younger age than some parents might think. Jesus used a small child as an illustration when He was teaching His disciples. He spoke harsh words that day. He said, *"Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a heavy millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea,"* Matthew 18:6. Notice how He described the children in that verse as *"little ones who believe in Me."* Children can believe in Jesus at an early age ... an age that varies from child to child. You may be thinking that a child, under adult pressure, might say the words of the sinner's prayer without meaning them. I agree. Such a decision would be similar to the one illustrated by the seed in rocky soil with no real root, Matthew 13:1-23. This is a danger ... but the risk is worth it. A tree is known by its fruit. If a child's life has no indication that his or her salvation was real, then it probably was not real. That child still needs to believe in Jesus... the process can be repeated. Parents are instructed, *"Train up a child in the way he should go, even when he is old he will not depart from it,"* Proverbs 22:6. That commandment includes a parent doing everything possible to bring a child to faith in Jesus. Some parents might say that they do not want to influence their child unfairly in this way. Such an attitude is unloving, disobedient, and cowardly. If you love your children, tell them about Jesus. Do everything that you possibly can do to bring them to Jesus. He said, *"Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves,"* Matthew 10:16. The Gospel presentation on the site www.911GOD.org might be an easy way for you to share the saving message of Jesus with your child. Sit down together ... visit the site ... and go through the Gospel with your son or daughter.

Does the salvation of the parent save a child? Does a parent's belief in, or rejection of, Jesus determine the eternal destiny of a child who dies before the age of accountability? There are some Christians who believe that such a child is saved only if at least one parent is a believer in Jesus. They use 1 Corinthians 7:12-16 to support their opinion. However, that passage teaches only that a believing parent provides a holy and spiritual influence on their unbelieving spouse or children. Both are "sanctified" by the believing parent ... meaning they are set apart to a holy influence. It does not mean that they are saved. To say that they are saved is contradictory to hundreds of other verses about the basis of personal salvation. There is nothing in the Bible indicating that one person's eternal destiny can be determined by another person's belief in Jesus. No one gets into Heaven by sharing another person's ticket ... and there are no family tickets. Some try to support their belief in family salvation by suggesting that the covenant relationship between God and Israel illustrates how God would treat the children of believers in Jesus. God spared the Israelite children from death in the last plague before the Exodus ... while not sparing the Egyptian children. Some say that God, in the same way, would spare the children of believers in Jesus. However, that is at best an assumption. The relationship between God and Israel was with the nation ... not with the individual Israelite. It took individual faith for an individual Israelite to be spiritually saved, Jeremiah 4:4 & 9:25-26. The Israelite parents in Egypt were a mix of believers and unbelievers ... those circumcised of heart and those not. God spared the children of both in the last plague. There is nothing in the Bible that indicates that God's compassion toward children is limited to those who have at least one believing parent. God is compassionate toward all children.

A theological explanation. The more complex question is: How can a child who dies before the age of accountability (born under the curse of Genesis 3, sharing the guilt of the sin imputed from Adam, and with an inherited sin nature) be allowed into Heaven? Original sin with its resultant curse, Genesis 3:1-19, seriously affected all mankind. It produced the disease-death environment of our fallen world ... the world into which every baby is born. Mental retardation and premature death are two of the possible physical consequences. Another consequence is that the human race became collectively guilty of the sin of Adam, Romans 5:12-21. That sin and its accompanying corporate guilt are transferred (imputed) to each individual. That is the only sin and only guilt that a baby could have before the age of accountability. Jesus paid for that imputed sin on the cross. Therefore, its guilt and condemnation is gone. Jesus reconciled mankind to God in paying for this imputed sin, Romans 5:10, thereby making each individual savable ... but not individually saved, 2 Corinthians 5:18-20. Another consequence of original sin is our inherited sin nature ... our natural tendency to do wrong. All babies are born with that sin nature. That tendency to sin is not sin ... although it unavoidably results in sin after an age of account-

ability. Before that age, there would be no personal sin ... and therefore, no guilt from it, or condemnation because of it. Children who die before the age of accountability can go to Heaven because Jesus has paid for their imputed sin on the cross ... and because their inherited sin nature is not actually sin and therefore has no guilt ... and because they have not committed any personal sin. In allowing such children into Heaven, God is fair, just, and compassionate.

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