

The Salvation of Infants: Part 2

By Dr. Norman Geisler

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(Part two continues the discussion with the next two views.)

Those God “Foreknows.”

According to this position, God, as an omniscient Being, foreknew which infants would have believed if they had lived long enough. God saved only those infants. The rest are lost, since they would not have believed if they had lived long enough to do so.

Statement of the View.

This view has common aspects with the elect-infant-only view (above) and the evangelization-after-death view (below). It argues that the Bible declares that God is omniscient (Ps. 139:1-6). As such, he knows “the end from the beginning” (Isa. 46:10). Indeed, he “foreknew” the elect (Rom. 8:29). And there seems to be no logical reason why these could not have included persons who would die in infancy among the elect.

One advantage over the elect-infant view is that the foreknowledge approach avoids the criticism that God is unmerciful and/or unjust in not trying to save all he possibly can. It takes account of the need for faith as a condition for receiving salvation (John 3:16-19). That is, it avoids the criticism that God saves some apart from their willingness to receive salvation. Another value of the view is that it preserves God’s omnibenevolence, his manifest love for all.

Critique of the View.

There are some drawbacks to this position. God’s foreknowledge is *based on* human free will rather than in himself as the sovereign God. That is, it holds that God saves these infants *because* of foreseen faith. This negates the unmerited grace of God who acts solely “out of the good pleasure of his will” (Eph. 1:5) and not based on anything we do (Eph. 2:8-9).

However, since one need not hold that God’s foreknowledge is *based on* anyone’s free choice but simply, as the Scripture’s say, *in accord with* it (cf. 1 Peter 1:2). They are simply coordinate, coeternal acts of God with no dependence of God on anything we do. God could have simply and graciously ordained that their potential free choice would be the means through which he would elect them. It is difficult to understand just how God could save people simply in view of their potential faith. If the free choice of believing is a necessary condition for receiving salvation, then it is difficult to understand how the fact that God knew that they would have believed is sufficient. This is knowledge of an alternative reality and so not knowledge in the sense of precognition. Of course, on the assumption that babies grow up in heaven they have a chance to actually believe. This would resolve the difficulty of how potential belief can count for actual belief. But if this is the case, it is no longer a matter of infant salvation, since they would have been actually saved after they were infants when they were old enough to believe for themselves. Also, salvation would be effected, not by potential or implicit faith, but through explicit faith.

Like the first view, this view lacks clear biblical support. It seems to be merely a theological possibility. There are no Scriptures declaring this is what God will do with infants.

Can someone be saved by potential faith? If faith is an absolute condition for salvation, then simply knowing that they could have believed is not enough. And responding that they not only would but do believe after death (when they “grow up”) is to reduce the view to the view that only those infants who believe when evangelized after death are saved (see below).

Some modern Catholic theologians speak of infants as exercising “implicit faith,” but it is very difficult to make sense out of the concept. How can someone whose faculties are not even developed enough to think or make moral choices possibly express any kind of faith? Certainly babies are dependent on their parents for food and other things, but they make no deliberate choice to do this. It is instinctive. But faith, at least conscious faith, is not automatic; it is voluntary. And this infants cannot do as infants.

This foreknowledge view involves the seemingly horrible injustice of condemning to eternal damnation tiny infants who have never sinned, which seems harshly unjust. A proponent of this view could argue that *all who die in infancy would have believed had they lived long enough*. Of course, one cannot deny this possibility. But then this modified position fades into the next one, that God in his mercy will save all infants.

All Infants.

Since the seventeenth century the view that all infants are saved has become the most popular in varying theological traditions. Some believe that all infants will eventually believe. Others believe that God will save infants apart from the condition that they would believe.

Statement of the View.

According to proponents of this teaching, there is no heaven for those who *will not believe*. Those who willingly reject God’s offer of salvation will perish (John 3:18; 2 Peter 3:9). But there is no verse that says those who *cannot believe* because they are not old enough to do so will be excluded from heaven (see Lightner). They appeal to a number of verses for support.

Jesus said “little children” are part of “the kingdom of God.” Mark wrote Jesus’ words, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these” (Mark 10:14b). Yet Jesus made it clear that “no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again” (John 3:3). It would follow, therefore, that these little children would all be in heaven.

Those who object point out that there is no proof that the term “children” refers to infants or those prior to an age of belief. Further, the phrase “the kingdom of God belongs to these” could refer to the fact that all must become as little children (and humble themselves) in order to enter the kingdom (Matt. 18:4).

King David prayed for his fatally ill child until the child died. Then he immediately ceased praying and said, “But now that he is dead, why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I will go to him, but he will not return to me” (2 Sam. 12:23). King David went to heaven (Ps. 16:10-11; Heb. 11:32). And surely his hope that he would see the child again encompassed more than their bodies being in the same grave. Hence, it would follow that David’s baby went to heaven.

Critics of this interpretation point out that the phrase might mean no more than “The dead do not return; we go to be with the dead.” In the Old Testament, the conception of life after death was not explicit. But David clearly anticipated resurrection (Ps. 16:10-11) as did

Job (cf. Job 19:25-26).

Psalms 139:13-16 speaks to God of creating and knowing him in his mother's womb. His life was recorded before it began. David refers to himself as a person, an "I" in the womb. This is taken by some to mean that God not only personally knows little embryos and infants but he covers them with his love so that they are written in his book in heaven.

Critics note that the "book" may be a figure of speech of God's omniscience or the book of his remembrance. There is no clear indication that it refers to the book of life of Revelation 20:12.

As to the age of accountability, Isaiah spoke of a little child before "he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right" (Isa. 7:15-16). This seems to imply that there is an age of moral accountability. Jesus said even of adults, "If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains" (John 9:41). How much more would this apply to infants who do not yet know moral right from wrong?

In response, critics observe that even if this referred to an age of accountability, it would not thereby prove all infants are saved. For there are still at least two other issues that must be settled before one can prove this, namely, that inherited depravity in itself is not enough to send one to hell and that faith is not an absolute essential to salvation. In short, Isaiah's reference to a young child not yet knowing good and evil may refer only to personal or social guilt, not to inherited sin.

Paul declared explicitly that "just as through the disobedience of the one man the many [i.e., all] were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man *the many [i.e., all] will be made righteous*" (Rom. 5:19, emphasis added). Since the text is clear that all are made righteous by Christ's death, it remains to ask in what sense were all saved by Christ's death.

Since universalism is clearly excluded by the context and by other Scriptures, this can not mean they were all *actually* made righteous. Further, it does not appear to refer to declaring us righteous in the sense of justification, for that comes only by faith (Rom. 1:17; 3:21-26). It can mean, however, that original sin brought about by Adam is canceled by Christ. If so, then no human being is hell-bound because of Adam's sin. They must commit sins of their own to go there. In this case, since infants have not committed personal sins, they could all be saved even though they are not yet old enough to believe. The judicial condemnation brought by Adam (Rom. 5:12) was reversed, and God is free to save any and all. This being the case, there is no reason that God must condemn infants. Christ died for them. God can save them if he wishes to do so. But since God is long-suffering, not willing that any should perish (2 Peter 3:9), and since the infants cannot believe, God saves them through the finished work of Christ.

Critics of this view point to its novelty and deny its necessity. It is possible and traditional to interpret the verse in other ways. They also observe that this view tends toward universalism. In fact, universalists take all being "made righteous" to support their view. Most importantly, it eliminates faith as a necessary condition of salvation.

Critique of the View.

The merits of this view is that it both satisfies the justice of God and magnifies God's omnibenevolence. In addition, it offers some plausible basis in Scripture. Nonetheless, it is hard to find clear scriptural justification for it and plenty of statements that faith is a necessary condition for receiving the gift of eternal life (John 3:36; Acts 16:31; Heb. 11:6). In

response, it can be argued that faith is a *normative* requirement for salvation but not an *absolute* one. That is to say, faith may normally be a condition for salvation; it is the way God requires of all adults. But there may be no inherent necessity that little children must believe in order to be saved.

It is argued that, by its very nature, salvation of free creatures involves a free consent. It is not possible to force someone to be saved. Saving infants against their will is no more possible than saving adults against their will. Free creatures cannot be forced into the fold.

In response, proponents note that infants are not saved *against their will* but simply *apart from their will*—because they are too young to believe. They insist that there is a significant difference in God saving persons who *will not* believe and saving those who *cannot believe*—because they are not yet old enough to believe. The fact remains that they are saved *without believing* which violates the belief that faith is necessary for salvation.

It is always possible that all infants are the class of those who would have believed had they been old enough to do so. And that they will be given the opportunity to do so when they “mature” in heaven. In this case, the problem of faith and freedom is resolved.

Critics point out that nowhere does the Bible spell out any age of accountability. Thus, it is purely speculative. In response, it is noteworthy that there is some evidence in Scripture that there is some point of moral responsibility in one’s life. In addition, both experience and common consent inform us that tiny children are not morally responsible. This is why small children do not stand trial for wrongs they do. Psychologically, when they are infants and small children, their rational faculties have not even developed to discern good from evil. Finally, the fact that it is difficult to point to a precise age at which this occurs is not an insurmountable problem. Like self-consciousness, even if we do not know precisely when it occurs, we know that it occurs. In fact, the precise age of accountability may differ individually, depending on their moral development. Perhaps it is earlier for those who are exposed to concepts of moral right and wrong earlier. At any rate, it probably occurs sometime between ages four and twelve. The point at which it occurs is when the individual is old enough to understand the difference between moral right and wrong and the consequences of making moral choices. In biblical terms, when they are aware of the “law written in their hearts” (Rom. 2:15). They are morally accountable when they are old enough to know that what they do is against the moral law of God. Or, as Isaiah said, they are morally responsible when they are old enough to “to reject the wrong and choose the right” (Isa. 7:15).

Criticisms of this view are not definitive. It is theologically possible and biblically plausible. The most problematic issue is the need for these infants to eventually exercise conscious faith of their own. This, however, is not insurmountable especially in view of the possibility that God foreknew that they would be among those who would eventually “grow up” and believe. At this point, of course, the view merges with both the foreknowledge view and the evangelization after death view.

(This series will conclude next week.)