

## **Baptism In Biblical Perspective: Infants – Death or Salvation?**

**Matthew 19:13-15**

By [Dr. Harry Reeder III](#)

*February 15, 2009 – Evening Sermon*

We have finished our series on baptism but I thought it would be helpful to address a question that is ever before a pastor for many reasons, but one of course, is because we are constantly asked questions about situations concerning infants as a pastor when someone loses a child whether it is in those infant years, from the womb or after birth. This type of question always comes up on our 3-D Night. The questions consist of something to this nature; what is the eternal condition of them and what about those who are incapacitated to the point of physical dynamics in their life where they are not capable of processing a Gospel presentation. If you are saved by grace through faith in Christ, how do you get faith? Faith comes by hearing the Word but yet they are not capable of processing either in their infancy or because of various forms of physical disabilities or retardations, etc. So what is it and what would the Bible have us to know and believe about this?

This is not a new question. Our confession, of course, addresses it. It addresses it in a very interesting way and one that I deeply appreciate. Let me give it to you. What is the eternal condition of infants and incapacitated as they would die in infancy or in their state of incapacity? The confession say that 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. So here the confession addresses this issue by coming to what they know is true. All of the elect will be saved. Therefore they postulate all elect infants. Now what they don't answer is whether they believe all infants in such condition dying are elect or not. So it now comes to us. If we believe all the elect are being saved, it now comes to us of whether there is any reason from God's Word that we might be encouraged to believe that such infants and incapacitated are numbered with the elect and under the saving grace of Christ.

So let's begin to work our way through this by first of all affirming three Biblical assumptions that we know are true. The first assumption is that we know all have sinned. We are all sinners and no one is innocent. I know that we have the sense when we look at a child that a child is innocent. I assure you that a child is not

innocent. I assure you from day one in conception all the way through birth the child is born a sinner. If you don't believe that then have one and take them home. You will find out very quickly that they are not good and have to be taught to sin. They are sinners. We don't sin and become sinners. We are born sinners and that's why we sin. All have sinned. All of the sons and daughters of Adam have sinned. In sin my mother conceived me (Psalm 51:5). David affirms his sin nature and his sin record begins at conception itself. By the way, this is thereby affirming the personhood of the conceived child in the womb. So there is in fact, that basic statement that all are sinners and there is no one that is innocent. There is none who seeks God, no not one (Romans 3:12).

There are two things you can be assured of when you look at your children. The first one is that they are not atheists. You have to be taught to be an atheist. They are born in the image of God. They bare the image of God and they have the image of God written upon their heart. They are fully aware of that as well as the work of the law written upon their heart. The second thing you can be assured of is that you don't need to teach them to sin. They will do that automatically because of that sin nature that they have.

The second assumption we can be sure of is that all of the elect will be saved. One of my favorite passages is Romans 8 and I quote it pretty regularly in my pulpit, in my life and in everything else. The Bible says in Romans 8:33; "*Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies.*" So who does God justify? He justifies the elect. How many of them? All of them. He goes on to say in the next verse (Romans 8:34);

*Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God." The Bible also says this is Romans 8:28-30; 28 And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. 29 For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. 30 And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.*

There is an unbreakable chain from the sovereignty of God in election to the surety of God in glorification and not one is lost.

The third assumption that we know is that the Spirit of God is sovereign and works when and how He so wishes. Now His normal means of working is with the Word of God. It is through the preaching of the Word where the Spirit of God accompanies the preaching of the Word and brings forth new life as people are born again. But the Spirit of God is able to extraordinary things and that is affirmed even under one of the key passages concerning regeneration. This is

found in John 3 where Nicodemus has come affirming that Jesus is a good teacher and Jesus confronts Him. John 3:3-8 says,

*3 Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." 4 Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" 5 Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. 6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' 8 The wind (Greek word meaning wind and Spirit) blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."*

The sovereign Spirit works how and when and whatsoever fashion He so desires. His ordinary means is in concert with the Word of God but He is able to do extraordinary by His own hand and by His own power and sovereign direction under the Lordship of Christ.

Harry, then it seems to me that such infants if we're all guilty, and only the elect are saved, then our only hope concerning such infants and incapacitated is exactly where the confession leaves us and that is, in their sovereign election. Have they been elected by the sovereign grace and mercy of God unto salvation? The Bible is not explicit in this matter. The Bible is explicit that all of the elect will be saved. The Bible is explicit about no one being innocent but the Bible is not explicit in terms of whether such infants and the incapacitated are numbered with the elect and thereby under the atonement of Christ. In my study of this matter over many years and I'll be happy to give more to those who wish to take it further in some research work that you can do, but I have shared pastorally with people seven implicit reasons why I believe that such infants dying in infancy and the incapacitated are numbered with the elect and under the atonement of Christ and the effectual calling of the Holy Spirit.

Why would you say this Harry? Please note the language that I use. I said, "seven *implicit* reasons." I did not say explicit. I don't have an explicit verse. I have seven implicit reasons why I believe that and why pastorally I share that as implicit reasons. There have been situations I have been in concerning this since I have been here for nine and a half years, when I was in my 17 years at Christ Covenant and when I was at my 3 year pastorate in Miami. The one thing a pastor cannot do is give a false assurance no matter how much you want to or how much you feel led to do so and a pastor cannot preach people into heaven out of his supposed graciousness beyond the graciousness of God. We are bound to God's Word. Our encouragement must be rooted in the Scriptures and our encouragement must be faithful to God's Word. So this would be the encouragement I would give you from God's Word as to the implicit reasons why I do believe that such infants are numbered with the elect and under the atoning

work of Christ thereby granting them justification by His blood and why I believe that the Holy Spirit does His effectual extraordinary work sovereignly to call them from death unto life. Harry why do you believe this? Here are my seven reasons. The first one, of course, is because while the Bible never teaches this notion of an age of accountability, the Bible does indicate very clearly that God takes into consideration concerning personal culpability one's capabilities and the information available to one in terms of personal guilt worthiness. For instance, in the judgments of God there would be times when the people would come through a city and He would spare those who did not know the right hand from the left. (By the way if you believe there's a specific age of accountability listed in the Bible then I would like for you to show it to me because it is not listed in the Bible.) There are times when God says to us very clearly that we are judged according to what we have. Luke 12:48 is an example of this when it says, *"Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more."*

We see the various judgments that fall upon individuals who fall under the wrath of God and the judgment of God having never heard the Gospel preached such as Romans 1 where it talks about those who have denied general revelation and then those who have fallen under the hand of God's judgment having been raised under pulpits that preach the Word of God. There is a greater judgment to whom much is given much is required and with greater light comes greater responsibility and with the greater capabilities to process that light comes greater responsibilities. Again this is not saying that anyone is innocent because there is none who is innocent. All have sinned but it is very clearly a declaration that God does, when He moves in the lives of people, postulate culpability in terms of capability and information availability. No one is innocent. All are guilty but some are guiltier than others concerning their status and capabilities and culpabilities in life.

The second implicit reason is the Biblical record records God continual extended mercy not only to those who didn't know the right hand from the left but God's extended work of mercy when God builds the temple, what does He do? He makes available a place for something that no one else in the Middle East would in such a religious edifice. He makes a place for the women. He makes a place for the court of the Gentiles. When He establishes the three refuge cities it's a place of mercy for those who are in need of extended mercy, God's provision of mercy, they can come there for relief. What I am trying to tell you is that while you and I work through this issue and there's this sense of graciousness and mercifulness, you will never be more merciful than God. You will never be more gracious than God. The question is, will you commit God to grace and mercy that is unjust or not? Is there a basis for God to extend this mercy on the basis of His justice?

A third implicit evidence that I would appeal to is the affirmation of the Holy Spirit's sovereign capability that the Holy Spirit is able and can and does work in

marvelous ways and can work beyond the preaching of the Word of God and can work beyond but those who can process the preaching of the Word of God. Here I would like to postulate something for you. I would like to make a statement to you that I have experienced in my life and this is one that I stand and marvel at the work of the Holy Spirit. I am so grateful for our ministry to the special needs children here at Briarwood because in God's providence while this is not impinged upon my personal life to any great degree it has in my pastoral life.

The very first congregation that I pastored one of my elders had a little boy named Petey and Petey had Down syndrome. Petey and I were good buddies. I would meet with the elders to pray before the morning worship service and I would leave and come out and Petey was always in the room on the way to the pulpit waiting for me. He had a piano in there and he was playing the piano. He would beat that piano like you have never heard anyone beat a piano before. I'm going to send Daniel Cason our piano player to get lessons from Petey. Then Petey would start singing. His number one song was Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so. Many times I would stop and talk with Petey and ask him "do you know that Jesus loves you?" He would say "yes preacher." He would say that as if I was just discovering that Jesus loves me. I said, "Petey do you love Jesus?" He said, "Why of course, preacher." I would say, "Then let's sing some more." And we would sing some more.

I am putting this in the area of observation not chapter and verse in the Bible but I had become convinced that while Petey did not have the capabilities for sophisticated processing of high level thinking, actually his down syndrome perhaps had freed him from the sophistication of sin to very simply hear the gospel in a way that I could never hear it. In some ways God had his physical situation to address his spiritual condition of being dead in his sins in a way that the gospel just came through a whole lot clearer to him than it did to us who are so sophisticated in the way that we process all that the world pours into our mind. He just kind of tuned that out. I am amazed at how the Holy Spirit can do things beyond what we normally would think that could be done. He blows where He wishes, He moves as He wishes and He moves upon whom He wishes and He moves how He wishes in normal concert with the proclamation of the Gospel but even beyond that.

The fourth implicit evidence that I would mention to you is the Biblical record of the extraordinary regenerating work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of Jeremiah and John the Baptist. Here is an example of the Holy Spirit working beyond that. We are told that Jeremiah was called to the Lord from his mother's womb. One may be thinking, "Harry isn't that referring to the decree that he was predestined to serve the Lord?" No, that would be before the womb. That is referring to the work of the Holy Spirit that called him and set him apart personally. It wasn't talking about a sovereign decree before he was ever created. He is talking about a sovereign working of the Holy Spirit before he was ever birthed while he was in the womb.

The same thing is true with John the Baptist. This is found in Luke 1. This happens after the Virgin Mary has been given the calling to bear forth the Son of God, the Savior of sinners. Mary takes a trip to meet her cousin Elizabeth. Luke 1:39-44 says,

*39 In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, 40 and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 41 And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, 42 and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! 43 And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? 44 For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. This leaping was not just simply a leaping of physical life but it was a leap of joy. That was one of those aspects of the fruit of the Spirit. He leapt for joy and Luke 1:45 goes on to say, *And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.*"*

The Holy Spirit normally works through the Word of God but can work beyond the Word of God. Jeremiah is an example of this. Now stop and think with me for a minute. All of us are guilty. All of us are born sinners. None of us are innocent. I don't have a free ride up to age 13. I am always accountable to the Lord, from the womb forward. What is our hope? Does the election of God include such number? Is God sovereign? Can God number such children with the elect? I'm not asking did He, I'm asking can He? The Bible says to us very clearly, "I will have mercy upon whom I will have mercy, I will show grace to whom I will show grace" (Romans 9:15). The Lord clearly is sovereign in election if He so determines to number such with the elect.

Can the Holy Spirit work beyond the normal means of the preaching of the Gospel to quicken someone from death unto life because you don't get to heaven unless you are part of the elect and under the atonement of Christ? You don't get to heaven unless the Holy Spirit calls you. Is there evidence in the word of God, not only that God is sovereign and can number such with the elect, but also that God has, can and does work beyond the normal means to quicken spiritual life in someone? We have two evidences of this which are Jeremiah and John the Baptist that God has done such. We also have evidences of His election. One of the most horrific chapters in all the Bible is Ezekiel chapter 16 in which the judgment is falling upon Jerusalem. Part of the judgment upon the people of Jerusalem was that they had gone back to child sacrifices, offering their children as burning sacrifices in the altar of Molech. The condemnation of the Lord was this; how dare you prostitute yourself and so destroy My children, not yours, My children. What did He call those covenant children? He called them "My children," belonging to Him. So we have an evidence, not only an affirmation that

the Holy Spirit can work beyond but we have evidence of it in Jeremiah and John the Baptist.

The fifth implicit reason is we have a biographical incident of someone who receives assurance and encouragement concerning their infant's eternal condition of salvation. This is found in 2 Samuel and I have been going back through this in my devotionals recently. I have been absolutely overwhelmed at the excitement of this passage. This passage is concerning the child that David had as he killed Uriah and had adultery with Uriah's wife. She bore the child and 2 Samuel 12:16-23 says,

*16 David therefore sought God on behalf of the child. And David fasted and went in and lay all night on the ground. 17 And the elders of his house stood beside him, to raise him from the ground, but he would not, nor did he eat food with them. 18 On the seventh day the child died. And the servants of David were afraid to tell him that the child was dead, for they said, "Behold, while the child was yet alive, we spoke to him, and he did not listen to us. How then can we say to him the child is dead? He may do himself some harm." 19 But when David saw that his servants were whispering together, David understood that the child was dead. And David said to his servants, "Is the child dead?" They said, "He is dead." 20 Then David arose from the earth and washed and anointed himself and changed his clothes. And he went into the house of the LORD and worshiped. He then went to his own house. And when he asked, they set food before him, and he ate. 21 Then his servants said to him, "What is this thing that you have done? You fasted and wept for the child while he was alive; but when the child died, you arose and ate food." 22 He said, "While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept, for I said, 'Who knows whether the LORD will be gracious to me, that the child may live?' (David is fully aware of culpability and he sought God's face with prayer and fasting) 23 But now he is dead. Why should I fast? (David gives two reasons why he shouldn't fast now) Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me."*

People tell me that David is just meaning that the child will go to the grave just like him but I don't know about you but I don't get excited and go worship the Lord just because I'm going to die. I worship the Lord because I know where I am going where I die. So his encouragement came from knowing that he would now put on festal robes of rejoicing, why? It was because God's answer had been given to his prayer. The answer was no and the child was taken. The second reason why he did was because he knew that where the child was there he would go and there he would be. David encouragement, I believe, becomes our encouragement, another implicit evidence.

The sixth implicit reason is the insistence of Christ and inviting to Himself and also using children as a metaphor, as a description of those who are saved by

grace. This is found in a text that is repeated by the Gospels and I would just use one place where it is found which is in Matthew 19. The Gospel of Luke identifies the word children as infants in Luke's passage. Matthew 19:13-15 says, **13** *Then children (infants) were brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked the people, 14 but Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven."* **15** *And he laid his hands on them and went away.* Here we see a very unique situation in which our Savior insisted that the children be brought to Him and He then uses their childlike position to become a picture of what it means to be saved by grace.

The seventh implicit reason is then in this same text Jesus does a significant and singular act not repeated in the Gospels, He laid His hands on them. This is very difficult for us here. We hardly understand what it means to lay hands on in an ordination service and what it means to lay hands on in prayer but this a highly significant act. When Messiah does this singular act He does not repeat with these children. He lays His hands upon them and then gives the benediction, the blessing upon them as He prays for them. This extraordinary and singular act of Christ, of laying on of hands and at the same time blessing them, did not escape the notice of all that was there and should not us. Let me give you an eighth unnumbered reason and it's one that believers, I believe, are allowed to take great encouragement from and that is God's covenant promise to you. Our hope is not, of course, in a child's baptism. We don't believe in baptismal regeneration. Our hope is in God's covenant promises and as believers we take particular in His declaration which is 1 Corinthians 7:14; "Your children are holy. I have set them apart." We take particular delight in the passages that say "I will be a God to you and to your children after you, believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved, you and your household. The promise is for you and your children, for all who are a far off for even as many as the Lord your God shall call to Himself."

Has God sovereignly allowed election? Yes He has. Is election based upon what we do or upon what God does? It is based upon God's grace and mercy, and God's grace and mercy alone. No one enters the kingdom of God without being born again. Can the Holy Spirit do beyond His ordinary means of a new birth through the preaching of the word and beyond that? Yes the evidences are in the Bible. Do we have biographical incidences of believers taking comfort concerning their child's eternal state as with David? Yes we do.

Then the question that you would address to me is, "Harry, with these seven implicit reasons why doesn't God just say it? Why isn't there just an explicit statement, like 'all infants dying in infancy and the incapacitated are numbered with the elect and will be born again'?" I believe there are two reasons for that. One is of course so that we don't begin to think that there is another route called an age of innocence because there is none that is innocent. We are always looking to kind of create another door beyond the electing love of Christ and the



work of the Holy Spirit but there is no other way. The second reason I believe is because of the hardness of their hearts, of our hearts. Here's an example.

The other day a man came up to me and said, "I was at the service where you preached on the sanctity of life and if you keep doing that you're not gonna be able to grow a church nowadays." I said, "It's not my aim to grow a church, it's to preach the truth and I think God will grow the church. I can't grow a church anyway. Every church I grow will last anyway. We just have to preach the truth on this issue and where Satan brings the battle we have to step up. Now we are going to do it lovingly, graciously and comprehensively but we're going to do it." He said, "Why do you get so worked up about this? They are all going to heaven." That's where if you don't mind, I just kind of turned the tables. I said to him, "Could you just give me the reasons why they are in heaven?" He had not heard my sermon on the seven implicit reasons yet. I would be able to show him that he was making a conclusion that he had no warrant to make.

What I want you to see is how easy we can take false assurances and become hardened to sinful activities. For instance, some of the people that came from Europe to settle this country believed in baptismal regeneration and as they marched through the Americas they would line up the natives. They would baptize them and then kill them. That's recorded. Why? They would say, "See we saved them so now we can get rid of them. See how false doctrine can be used in the hardness of hearts? So I believe we would look at possibly childhood diseases differently. I believe we would look at issues like abortion and infanticide differently. I believe that is why God has not given us explicit testimony but implicit testimony so that we can grant encouragement and hope, not with platitudes.

There is no way I can step into a home where someone has lost a child and say, "Everybody's innocent until they're 13." I can't do that. I'm not going to step into a home and say, "Well, you're child was a little flower and God was picking the flower for heaven." My goodness, that's almost offensive. I know what's motivated by it but that's almost offensive. I think our hope only comes from looking at the Scriptures and I believe these are the Scriptures that would implicitly give hope that such children are numbered with the elect and the effectual calling of the Holy Spirit. It's my privilege to share that with people time after time, so that their hope is in the Lord and His grace and mercy.

May I be very Presbyterian for a minute? That is why I am so grateful for the doctrine of sovereign election. If I believe that people are elected on the basis of what God knows they'll do then I have no hope. I have no hope for such children. In other words, if I believe election is based upon what someone does then I have no hope. My hope is in a sovereign election by a gracious God who would be disposed to number such children with the elect. I have given you the seven reasons why I believe He is, implicit reasons grant it but the seven reasons why I believe He is. But my hope is not in their innocence, my hope is not in a platitude,

my hope is not in some vended age of accountability but my hope is the same place for them that it is for me. It is in Love. He predestined us to adoption as sons, being rich and gracious in mercy. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the time that we could be together. Thank You Father, for the privilege to be in Your Word. Lord, these are challenging issues in which believers work their way through them. Would You allow us to be faithful to what You have revealed in Your Word and not to go beyond it, nor to fall short of it? Thank You O God, for these implicit evidences that give encouragement and hope that Your grace and mercy sovereignly dispose as numbered such with the elect and under the atoning work of Christ and the effectual calling of the Holy Spirit. Thank You for the evidences throughout Scripture. In You O Jesus is our Hope, Amen.

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