

The Salvation of Little Children Who Die: What We Do and Don't Know

*These truths from latter-day revelation are
some of the sweetest truths of the gospel.*

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A friend of mine once shared an experience he had on his mission in Brazil. He and his companion met a woman who forcefully declared that she was not interested in any religious message. A religious leader had once told her that her infant son who died could never be saved because he had not been baptized. The thought of that broke her heart. She told the missionaries that unless they had a better message, she wanted nothing to do with their religion.

Fortunately, they had a better message.

The doctrine of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on the salvation of little children can be summarized in a single verse of scripture: "All children who die before they arrive at the years of accountability are saved in the celestial kingdom of heaven" (Doctrine and Covenants 137:10).

Although this doctrine is clear, many people still have questions about or misunderstand this topic. Let's shed some light on a few of the most common questions.



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How Are Little Children Saved?

Many people assume that little children are saved simply because they are innocent. While little children certainly are innocent, the Book of Mormon teaches plainly that without the Atonement of Jesus Christ, even “little children . . . could not be saved,” because “in Adam, or by nature, they fall” (Mosiah 3:16).

Although they are innocent of any sin, little children would still be subject to physical and spiritual death brought by the Fall. As a result, without the Resurrection and Atonement of Jesus Christ, they would be eternally lost, as would the rest of us (see 2 Nephi 9:6–10).

Gratefully, the Book of Mormon clarifies that “the blood of Christ atoneth for” little children (Mosiah 3:16), and “the curse of Adam is taken from them” (Moroni 8:8). Because of the Savior’s Atonement, little children are free from the effects of the Fall of Adam and Eve, “for they are whole” (Moses 6:54).

At What Age Are Children Saved?

Doctrine and Covenants 137:10 teaches that “all children . . . are saved in the celestial kingdom of heaven.” The only condition is that they “die before they arrive at the years of accountability.” Elder Bruce R. McConkie (1915–85) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles explained: “Accountability does not burst full-bloom upon a child at any given moment in his life. Children become accountable gradually, over a number of years. Becoming accountable is a process. . . . There comes a time, however, when accountability is real and actual and sin is attributed in the lives of those who develop normally. It is eight years of age, the age of baptism.”¹

In other words, accountability develops within children all along, but at eight years old they are sufficiently accountable to be baptized and are therefore sufficiently accountable for their own sins.

As any parent knows, however, this does not mean children are incapable of doing something they know is wrong. What it does mean is that they are not yet sufficiently responsible for these wrong choices.

Children have what might appropriately be called a “grace period,” when



they are not responsible for their wrongdoings as they learn and grow into accountability. If they should die in that time, then they are saved by the grace of Christ without baptism or any other effort on their part (see Moroni 8).

What Will Little Children Be Like When They Are Resurrected?

President Joseph F. Smith (1838–1918) lost many children to early deaths. He was comforted by the doctrine that little children would be resurrected as little children and raised to maturity by their righteous parents after the Resurrection. President Smith once shared the following: “Joseph Smith taught the doctrine that the infant child that was laid away in death would come up in the resurrection as a child; and, pointing to the mother of a lifeless child, he said to her: ‘You will have the joy, the pleasure, and satisfaction of nurturing this child, after its resurrection, until it reaches the full stature of its spirit.’ There is restitution, there is growth, there is development, after the resurrection from death. I love this truth. It speaks volumes of happiness, of joy and gratitude to my soul. Thank the Lord he has revealed these principles to us.”²

Not only will little children reach full maturity; they will also reach full exaltation. Abinadi taught that “little children also have eternal life” (Mosiah 15:25). The Prophet Joseph Smith taught that “you shall have your children; for they shall have eternal life, for their debt is paid.”³

To obtain the highest degree of the celestial kingdom, those who are accountable must enter into the new and everlasting covenant of marriage (see Doctrine and Covenants 131:1–3). Little

children who die will have this opportunity in the future. President Joseph Fielding Smith (1876–1972) explained: “The Lord will grant unto these children the privilege of all the sealing blessings which pertain to exaltation. . . . When they grow, after the resurrection, to the full maturity of the spirit, they will be entitled to all the blessings which they would have been entitled to had they been privileged to tarry here and receive them.”⁴

Why Do Little Children Die?

This question is difficult to answer, especially for those who have lost a child. Perhaps the best way to start to answer this question is with the words of Nephi, who testified, “I know that [God] loveth his children; nevertheless, I do not know the meaning of all things” (1 Nephi 11:17).



The Prophet Joseph Smith and his wife, Emma, had reason to ask why little children die—six of their children died.

We do not know all the reasons for every tragedy that happens in mortality, but we can rest assured that God loves us. Although we should not assume that tragedies are God's will, His plan provides the way to overcome all tragedies.⁵ "Earth has no sorrow that heav'n cannot cure."⁶

The Prophet Joseph Smith and his wife, Emma, had reason to ask why little children die—six of their children died. The Prophet said: "I have meditated upon the subject, and asked the question, why it is that infants, innocent children, are taken away from us, especially those that seem to be the most intelligent and interesting. The strongest reasons that present themselves to my mind are these: This world is a very wicked world. . . . The Lord takes many away, even in infancy, that they may escape the envy of man, and the sorrows and evils of this present world; they were too pure, too lovely, to live on earth; therefore, if rightly considered, instead of mourning we have reason to rejoice as they are delivered from evil, and we shall soon have them again."⁷

Another servant of the Lord, Elder McConkie, experienced the death of an infant granddaughter. At her funeral he said, "There are certain spirits who come into this life only to receive bodies; for reasons that we do not know, but which are known in the infinite wisdom of the Eternal Father, they do not need the testing, probationary experiences of mortality."⁸

No Blessing Will Be Withheld

Although nothing in this life can take away the feelings of loss a family experiences with the death of a child, we may find comfort in the doctrine that little children who



die will be exalted. We know this because it has been revealed by our loving Father in Heaven and taught by His modern prophets and apostles.

These truths from latter-day revelation are some of the sweetest and most comforting truths of the gospel. ■

NOTES

1. Bruce R. McConkie, "The Salvation of Little Children," *Ensign*, Apr. 1977, 6.
2. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph F. Smith* (1998), 132.
3. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (2007), 177.
4. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation* (1955), 2:54.
5. See Quentin L. Cook, "The Songs They Could Not Sing," *Ensign* or *Liahona*, Nov. 2011, 104–7.
6. "Come, Ye Disconsolate," *Hymns*, no. 115.
7. *Teachings: Joseph Smith*, 176.
8. Bruce R. McConkie, in Robert L. Millet, "Alive in Christ: The Salvation of Little Children" in *The Book of Mormon: Fourth Nephi through Moroni, From Zion to Destruction*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (1995), 11.