

The Age Of Accountability

One of the most common and widely-held ideas in the Church today is the idea of the age of accountability. This doctrine teaches that God only holds you responsible for your sins once you are old enough to understand the gospel. If you attend a Baptist church for any length of time it will not be long before you hear someone bring up this idea.

Now, the exact age at which God starts holding you accountable is a matter of debate. Most people claim that it is different for each person, and that a few people (such as the insane or mentally handicapped) never reach this age at all. They go on to say that those who die *before* they reach this age automatically go to Heaven, since God doesn't hold their sins against them. Only those who reach this point in their life need to be saved. To put it more plainly: all children and mentally-challenged people go to Heaven.

I have been in the Baptist denomination for approximately ten years, and during that time I've heard numerous sermons along these lines. This is clearly a very deep and passionately-held belief. However, one thing I've noticed is that in all the sermons I've heard on this idea, not one of them tried to use the Bible to justify it. Not a single one.

To me this immediately raised red flags. If this teaching is true then there must be some support for it in the Scriptures. In that case, why not bring it up? Why not proudly display the evidence for all the world to see? Pastors use the Bible to defend their beliefs all the time. Why is this topic any different?

I've encountered the same thing when talking to church members who believed in this teaching. No one I've ever talked with has told me they believed in it because they ran across a verse in the Bible that taught it. In every case, people believed it simply because they could not believe that God would send a child to Hell. That idea was so horrifying that the "age of accountability" doctrine *had* to be true. Whether it was actually true or not wasn't that important. People had an emotional need for this to be true, and so they held on to it. They might not have been able to defend it or point to any Bible verses that taught it. But they believed it all the same.

Now, I am not saying that no one has ever tried to use the Bible to defend this teaching. But what I am saying is that most people who believe this idea do so for emotional reasons, not for Biblical ones. This belief is not widely-held because people encounter it while reading their Bible. It's widely-held because *people desperately want it to be true*.

The question is, are they right? Is the age of accountability something real, or is it just a myth? Let's take a look and see.

If you try to research this topic you'll quickly discover that few people try to defend this belief by quoting Bible verses. Instead, theologians will tell you that it's obviously not in the character of God to send children to Hell. They'll say that God would never dream of holding people responsible for their sins when they had no idea that they were sinning. They will also say that it is an offense to God to require faith from someone who is mentally incapable of understanding what faith is.

But most of the time you won't see them using the Bible to defend these statements. If it's not in the character of God to send children to Hell then it should be easy to provide a few Bible verses to back this up – but that doesn't happen. If God doesn't hold people responsible for sinning out of ignorance then just show us where the Bible says that – but they don't. If God doesn't hold mentally challenged people responsible for their lives then just show us the Bible verses that back that up. You would think that, if these things were truly obvious, then that would be easy – but it's not.

In fact, so far I have found only two Bible verses that have been used to support the age of accountability. The first one is this one:

2 Samuel 12:23: “But now he is dead, wherefore should I fast? can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me.”

This is by far the most commonly quoted verse. If you go up to a pastor and say “Where can I find the age of accountability taught in the Bible?” this is the verse you'll be given. In order to understand why, let me back up and give a little context. David had committed adultery with Bathsheba, and as a result she got pregnant. David eventually sought forgiveness for what he had done. God forgave him, but there were consequences:

2 Samuel 12:13: “And David said unto Nathan, I have sinned against the LORD. And Nathan said unto David, The LORD also hath put away thy sin; thou shalt not die.

14 Howbeit, because by this deed thou hast given great occasion to the enemies of the LORD to blaspheme, the child also that is born unto thee shall surely die.”

In other words, as a consequence of what David had done, God decided to kill his child. David begged God to spare his son, but God did not and the child died. That is when David said what was quoted in verse 23 – he was telling his servants that his son was dead and there was nothing he could do about it. “I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me.”

So what does that phrase mean? Those who teach the age of accountability say that this verse proves their case. In other words, “I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me” is translated to mean “since the child died before he was old enough to believe in God, he is saved and is in Heaven. However, if he'd grown up to be a teenager he would have had to believe in God or else he'd wind up in Hell.” When you put it like that it seems ridiculous, but that is what people claim the verse means.

Personally, I think that interpretation vastly overstates what David was actually saying. If “I shall go to him” means “one day I'll die”, and if “he shall not return to me” means “he won't come back to life”, then what David is saying is “one day I'll die too, but my son won't come back to life.” Did David believe that he would see his son in Heaven? Perhaps, but at the very least it's unclear – and David was definitely *not* trying to make a blanket statement that applies to all children that were ever born. What I do know is that David did *not* say “It's ok that my son is dead because all children go to Heaven. God doesn't hold children responsible for being saved.” In fact, David doesn't say anything remotely like that.

There is one other verse that could be used to defend this doctrine. It is this one:

1 John 2:12: “I write unto you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for his name's sake.”

At first glance that verse looks quite definite. I could see how people could use this verse to argue that God doesn't hold a child's sins against him. However, look at the very next verse:

1 John 2:13: “I write unto you, fathers, because ye have known him that is from the beginning. I write unto you, young men, because ye have overcome the wicked one. I write unto you, little children, because ye have known the Father.”

John says that these children have “known the Father”. Isn't it quite possible that the reason their sins are forgiven is *because* they have known the Father? In other words, these children are saved not by an age of accountability but by their relationship with the Father, and their faith in Him.

You might be thinking “So what? Why does it matter?” One reason it matters is because the age

of accountability has some really bizarre consequences. This doctrine teaches that you can lose your salvation. It says that everyone is born saved, but after your brain develops to a certain point you lose that salvation and must believe in God. If you die before that happens then you'll go to Heaven, but if you die afterward you'll go to Hell. So if a 13-year-old teenager has already reached the age of accountability but hasn't accepted Jesus yet, and gets killed in a car accident, he will burn in Hell forever. However, if the car accident had happened a year earlier, before he reached that age, he would have ended up in Heaven. By virtue of getting older he lost his ticket to Heaven and had to regain it, or else face eternal damnation.

To put it another way – there have been around 50 million abortions since Roe vs. Wade. If the age of accountability is true then every single one of those aborted people have gone to Heaven. However, if those babies had not been aborted and were allowed to grow into adulthood, there's a very real chance that many of them would never have accepted Christ. So, then, being aborted *actually saved them all from Hell*. People get very angry when I mention this, but the age of accountability teaches that aborting your children sends them straight to Heaven. It guarantees their salvation.

People are appalled at the thought of killing your children to make sure they reach Heaven, and they should be. It is a horrifying idea and is deeply wrong. But it is exactly what the age of accountability implies. It could not be more clear: if all children are saved, but children lose their salvation when they reach adulthood, then aborting them before they're born guarantees they will reach Heaven. I read in the news just the other day of a mother who was worried that the Tribulation was about to begin, and so she tried to murder her preteen children so that they would be saved. Why? Because she thought that all children went straight to Heaven, so killing them would save their souls. This is *wrong* – this is deeply, horribly awful – but it's the logical consequence of the age of accountability, and *people do think this way*.

The Bible is clear that God *hates* people who murder children. It bothers Him *tremendously*. Jesus famously said that when it comes to child abuse, it would be better if the abuser had never been born. One of the reasons God sent the Israelites into exile at Babylon is because they were offering their children as human sacrifices to pagan gods. They were murdering their children, and God *did not like it*. Yet I am supposed to believe that, thanks to the age of accountability, this act that God so despises actually *guarantees* salvation – and that abortion has actually saved millions of souls?

If that really is the case then where is the Biblical evidence for it? Where does the Bible teach these things? I've heard people say “Well, God doesn't hold you accountable if you didn't know it was a sin.” This sounds like a nice idea, but it's not true. Take a look at this:

Leviticus 5:15: “If a soul commit a trespass, and sin through ignorance, in the holy things of the Lord; then he shall bring for his trespass unto the Lord a ram without blemish out of the flocks, with thy estimation by shekels of silver, after the shekel of the sanctuary, for a trespass offering;

16 And he shall make amends for the harm that he hath done in the holy thing, and shall add the fifth part thereto, and give it unto the priest: and the priest shall make an atonement for him with the ram of the trespass offering, and it shall be forgiven him.

Notice that God does not say “If a soul sins in ignorance, it's ok because he didn't know any better.” Nope. Instead God instituted a special sacrifice so that the person who sinned in ignorance could *ask for forgiveness*. God still held him accountable for what he had done – even though he didn't realize he was sinning – and still required him to seek forgiveness. It doesn't matter if you knew that you were sinning or not: a sin is still a sin, and you still must seek forgiveness for it.

In fact, the Bible is quite clear:

Romans 6:23: “For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

If you'll notice, that verse does not have any conditions. It doesn't say “The wages of sin is death, if you knew that you were sinning, and if you had reached adulthood, and if you were mentally competent, and if you were capable of understanding the gospel.” Nor does it say “The wages of sin is death for some people, but that does not apply to children, or the insane, or the unborn, or those who have never heard of Jesus.” It doesn't say *any* of those things. It is clear, direct, and to the point: the wages of sin is death. Period. It is death *for everybody*, because everybody has sinned:

Romans 3:23: “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God;”

Notice how clear this verse is! It says that all have sinned. It doesn't say “All adults have sinned”, or “those at the age of accountability have sinned, but children are innocent and God doesn't hold them responsible”. People desperately wish it said that, but it doesn't. There are no exclusions based on age or mental capacity. The Bible really does teach that everyone is a sinner, right down to the youngest child. It carves out no exceptions, nor does it teach that God somehow excuses sins done in ignorance. The wages of *all* sin – even ignorant sin – is death, no matter how old you are.

You might say “Well, but that doesn't apply to infants. They're innocent.” In fact, the Bible says that even the *unborn* are sinners:

Psalms 51:5: “Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.”

The psalmist is not saying that he was born of adultery; he is saying that he was a sinner *from conception*. None of us start out innocent. We are not born good people that fall into sin. We are sinners from the very first moment that our life begins – and life begins at conception, not when we are born.

Just in case we missed the point, God repeats this idea a few chapters later:

Psalms 58:3: “The wicked are estranged from the womb: they go astray as soon as they be born, speaking lies.”

When are the wicked “estranged”? Is it once they reach the age of accountability? No, it is *from the womb*. When do they become evil? Is it when they become teenagers? No, it is *as soon as they are born*. This idea that children are innocent, incapable of being evil, is not Biblical. Psalm 58:3 really does say that the wicked were evil *as babies*.

That is already more than most people can take, but there's more. Does God say that children aren't held responsible for what they do? No, it doesn't:

Proverbs 20:11: “Even a child is known by his doings, whether his work be pure, and whether it be right.”

Notice how this verse doesn't say “Sure, children misbehave, but it's ok because they're young and haven't reached the age of accountability yet.” Instead it says that even children are known for being good or being bad. They are capable of good and evil. This idea that children are innocent and sinless is simply not Biblical.

As if all that was not enough, we then come to this:

1 Corinthians 7:14: “For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the

unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband: else were your children unclean; but now are they holy."

This verse says something rather startling. Paul is examining the situation where one person in a marriage is saved and the other is not. Should they get a divorce? Paul says that there are some cases where they should stay married, and he talks about it for a while. One case he lists is verse 14, where the couple has children. Since one of the parents is saved, the children are holy. This is important, he says, because if neither of the parents were saved, the children would be *unclean*.

You can go back and reread the verse if you don't believe me. Notice how Paul divides children into two camps: those who are holy, *and those who are not*. This would have been an outstanding time for Paul to say "All children are holy and all children are saved", but he doesn't say that. Paul actually talks about children *that are not saved*.

Now, you might be thinking "Surely there's some other explanation for all this! Maybe these passages are meant to be taken in some symbolic way. Surely God considers *all* children to be holy and righteous." There is actually a passage we can look at to find out once and for all. In the Old Testament there was a time when God was determined to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. When Abraham found out about this he pleaded with God on behalf of Sodom, asking Him not to destroy it. Abraham finally ended his negotiations with this plea:

Genesis 18:32: "And he said, Oh let not the LORD be angry, and I will speak yet but this once: Peradventure ten shall be found there. And he said, I will not destroy it for ten's sake."

Do you know what happened? God couldn't find 10 righteous people, so he destroyed the cities:

Genesis 19:24: "Then the LORD rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the LORD out of heaven;
25 And he overthrew those cities, and all the plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and that which grew upon the ground."

The reason I bring this up is because there were certainly at least ten children in these cities. In fact, there were probably *thousands* of children. *Yet God did not find even ten righteous people*. If all children really are innocent and holy in God's sight, then God would have spared Sodom and Gomorrah on the grounds that there were more than 10 children there, and children were holy, and therefore God would not destroy the holy with the wicked. But that did not happen. In fact, the only people God rescued were Lot, his wife, and his two daughters. How many of the children of those cities did God rescue? *Zero*.

If all children are innocent and holy in God's sight then this would have been a fantastic place to make that point – but it did not happen. If children are sinless, or if God does not hold children accountable for their sins, then Romans 3 or I Corinthians 7 would have been a great place to mention that fact – but it wasn't mentioned.

If you've never heard this before then this is probably shocking. We tend to have our own ideas about what is right and wrong, and what is fair and unfair, and when God comes along and says that He sees things differently we tend to react by saying "No, God couldn't possibly have meant that. That's just crazy." We want to force God into thinking the way we think, instead of realizing that He is completely different. This is something that God Himself pointed out:

Isaiah 55:9: "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than

your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

So what is the answer? If the age of accountability is not true then what *is* true? What does the Bible actually say about what happens when a child dies before he is born?

Well, let's start in the book of Luke. There was a time when the disciples went to the Lord and were very excited because they had been able to cast out demons. The Lord said that was nice, but that wasn't something worth getting all excited about:

Luke 10:20: “Notwithstanding in this rejoice not, that the spirits are subject unto you; but rather rejoice, because your names are written in heaven.”

That seems like a strange thing to say. Who cares if your names are written in Heaven? What difference does that make? Well, it actually makes a lot of difference:

Revelation 20:12: “And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works.

13 And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works.

14 And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death.

15 And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire.”

Anyone whose name was not found written in the Lamb's Book of Life (which is a real book, by the way) was cast into the Lake of Fire, where they would be tormented day and night, forever and ever. All those whose names *were* written, however, were saved and given eternal life. In other words, whether you end up in Heaven or Hell is completely determined by whether or not your name is written in that book. That's why the Lord said that the disciples were to rejoice because their name was written in it – that meant they had eternal life to look forward to.

So, then, that brings up a question: when is your name written down in the book? Is it when you become saved? Actually, no. If your name is there, it was written there *when God created the world*:

Revelation 17:8: “The beast that thou sawest was, and is not; and shall ascend out of the bottomless pit, and go into perdition: and they that dwell on the earth shall wonder, whose names were not written in the book of life from the foundation of the world, when they behold the beast that was, and is not, and yet is.”

In other words, the Book of Life was completed when God created the world. If you are saved, your name was written there long before you were born. In fact, you were saved *because* your name was written there.

This is another unpopular truth, but it is true all the same. Strictly speaking, people do not come to God and get saved. Instead, God comes to people *and saves them*. From our perspective it looks like we are coming to God, but in reality what we're seeing is God saving us.

Paul expounded upon this idea in Romans:

Romans 9:11: “(For the children being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of him that calleth;)

12 It was said unto her, The elder shall serve the younger.
13 As it is written, Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated.”

In the Old Testament, God said that He loved Jacob and hated Esau. (Yes, believe it or not, God hated Esau. Not Esau's sin, but Esau himself. We like to say “Well, God hates sin but loves the sinner.” In this case, though, it was the sinner that God hated.) What is striking about this is that God hated Esau *before he was even born*. He didn't hate Esau because of anything he had done, because he hadn't done anything yet. This wasn't a case where Jacob was a good boy and Esau was a bad one, so God came to like Jacob and came to dislike Esau. No, what happened here was that before either of these people were born, God divinely chose to love one of them and hate the other – *and there was nothing either of them could do about it*. God extended mercy to Jacob and withheld it from Esau, simply to prove that people are saved based on God's divine choice.

This, of course, seems grossly unfair – which is the very next point Paul brings up:

Romans 9:14: “What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? God forbid.

15 For he saith to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.

16 So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy.”

These verses are possibly some of the most unpopular verses in the Bible, but they are crystal clear. God saves some people, and does not save others, based on *His divine choice*. He chooses to have mercy on some and He chooses to withhold that mercy from others. As verse 16 says, God doesn't make this decision based on how good you are, or who your father was, or even how much you want it. God is the one that makes the call, and He does so based solely on His own will – and He made the decision long before you were born.

This brings up a point: if God chooses to save some, but not others, then why does God hold the lost accountable? After all, it's not the fault, is it? Paul has this to say about that:

Romans 9:18: “Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth.

19 Thou wilt say then unto me, Why doth he yet find fault? For who hath resisted his will?

20 Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus?

21 Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour?”

In other words, God is in charge. He is the one that made the universe, and He is the one that created the human race. God does not owe any of us anything, including salvation and mercy. All of us have sinned and all of us deserve death. If God chooses to have mercy on some, but not others, then who are we to tell God that He has no right to do that? As verse 21 says, doesn't the potter have the right to do as he wishes with the clay? If he wants to rescue some pots and leave the others broken, then isn't that his business?

But why would God do that? Paul explains that as well:

Romans 9:22: “What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction:

23 And that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory,”

What we overlook is that both the righteous *and* the unrighteousness bring glory to God – in very different ways. Theologians call this the “grand demonstration”. Before the universe was created there were aspects of God's character that were hidden and had never been revealed in all the ages of eternity. For example, God could not show His mercy, grace, or forgiveness because no one had ever done Him wrong. God also had no way to demonstrate His wrath, judgment, or justice.

But when God created the world and mankind fell into sin, the situation changed. Now aspects of God's character that had been hidden could now be clearly seen. As verse 9 says, the wicked show God's wrath, power, and longsufferingness. The forgiven ones show His mercy, grace, and compassion. Both glorify God by revealing His character and allowing Him to demonstrate who He is.

What does all that have to do with children? Simply this: we are saved by repentance and faith in Jesus. However, the reason we have faith – the reason we repent – is because God divinely chose to write our name down in the Book of Life when He created the world. *God chose us*, and therefore we are saved. Theologians call this “irresistible grace”, and it is a very unpopular idea. But I believe it is exactly what the Bible teaches.

Whether or not children are saved depends entirely on whether their names are written in the Book of Life. If they are then they will inherit eternal life. If they're not then they won't. The Bible makes no exceptions – this policy holds true for everyone. Plus, no one's name is ever removed from the Book. You are either in or you are out.

The bottom line is that if God chooses to have mercy on a person then they will be saved, no matter how old they are or how sane or insane they may be. If God chooses to withhold that mercy then they will be lost.

Can we know for sure if a child is saved? Well, let me ask you a question: can you know for sure if another *adult* is saved? Remember, the disciple Judas had everyone fooled. When Jesus said “One of you will betray me”, no one said “Oh, I bet it's Judas! He's got those shifty eyes.” People honestly had no idea who the traitor might be. Judas fooled the eleven people who were closer to Jesus than anyone else of that day. If you can't tell if other adults are saved, then why would you think that children would be any different?

At the end of the day, it has to be enough to know that it is in God's hands, not ours. He is the one that makes the call, and He is perfect, holy, loving, and just. As far as I have seen God has not told us of any blanket policy that He might have. I think we simply have to trust Him – and He can most definitely be trusted.