

# THERE IS NO “AGE OF ACCOUNTABILITY”

ONE OF THE MOST COMMON beliefs in the Church today is something called 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 die *before* you reach that age then you are automatically saved and go straight to Heaven; however, if you die *after* you reach that age then you had better be saved or else you will go straight to Hell. In other words, you only need to be a Christian if you die *after* you reach the age of accountability. Everyone else gets a free pass.

Now, the exact age at which God starts holding people accountable is a matter of debate. Most people claim that it is different for each person, and that some people (such as the insane or mentally handicapped) never reach that age at all.

I've attended Baptist churches for a number of years now, and during that time I've heard numerous sermons about this belief. However, one thing I've noticed is that in all the sermons I've heard about the age of accountability, not a single one of them tried to defend this belief with the Bible. *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, and in that case why not show the proof? Why not proudly display the evidence for all the world to see? After all, 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 about this teaching. No one has ever told me that they began believing this doctrine because they ran across it in the Bible. 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 important. People had an emotional need for it to be true, and so they held on to it. They could not defend it or point to any Bible verses that taught it, but they still believed it all the same.

Now, I am *not* saying that no one in all of history has ever tried to defend this teaching with the Bible. What I *am* saying is that most people believe in this idea for purely emotional reasons. The reason this belief is so widely held is 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.

## THE WEAK DEFENSE

If you research this belief you'll quickly discover that very few people try to defend it 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 God would never require faith from someone who was mentally incapable of understanding what faith is.

Interestingly, even though theologians claim that all of

these things are “obviously” true, they don't use Bible verses to defend these “obvious” beliefs. 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 that statement up – but no supporting statements are offered. If God doesn't hold people responsible for sinning out of ignorance then it should be a simple matter for them to show us where the Bible says that – but they don't. If God doesn't hold mentally challenged people responsible for their lives then it should be easy to show where the Bible teaches that. If these things really are obvious then this should be a simple task – *but it's not*.

In fact, so far I have only found 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 will be given. In order to understand why, let's back up and take a look at the context. David had committed adultery with Bathsheba, and as a result she got pregnant. Some time after this David sought forgiveness for what he had done. God forgave him, but there were still 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 had grown up to be a teenager then he would have had to believe in God or else he would 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 they are vastly overstating what David actually said. 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 applied to all children that were ever born. What I do know is that David did *not* say “It's fine that my son is dead because all children go to Heaven. God doesn't hold children responsible for their sins.” 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 definitive. I could see how people could use this verse to argue that God doesn't hold a child's sins against him. However, before jumping to conclusions, take a look at what the very next verse has to say:

**I 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*.

## THE CONSEQUENCES OF BAD DOCTRINE

You might be thinking "So what? Why does it matter?" One reason it matters is because the age of accountability has some really terrible consequences. For example, it 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 you must start believing in God. If you die *before* that happens you will go to Heaven, but if you die *afterward* you will go to Hell.

To see what that means, let's say that a child that doesn't believe in Jesus gets hit by a car and dies. This doctrine teaches

that if the child is a 12-year-old who had *not* reached the age of accountability, then he would automatically go to Heaven. However, if the car accident happened one year later when the child *had* reached the age of accountability, then he would go to Hell. By virtue of getting *one year older* he lost his ticket to Heaven and was condemned to an eternity of torment.

That seems like a meaningless hypothetical situation, but it's not. You see, there have been more than 50 million abortions since Roe vs. Wade. If the age of accountability is true then every single one of those aborted babies have gone to Heaven. However, if those babies had *not* been aborted and had been allowed to grow into adulthood, there's a very real chance that many of them would never have accepted Christ. So, then, the age of accountability teaches that being aborted *actually saved them all from Hell*. It means that Roe vs Wade is the greatest evangelic tool that the world has ever seen. It has saved *tens of millions* of people from the fires of Hell and is vastly more effective than any missionary agency in the world.

It is a terrible thing to say, but it is the truth: the age of accountability teaches that aborting your children sends them straight to Heaven. Now, most people are horrified at the thought of murdering their children in order to save their souls, and they should be. It is a horrifying idea and is deeply wrong. *But that is exactly what the age of accountability teaches*. It could not be more clear: if children are born saved but lose their salvation when they reach adulthood, then aborting them before they are born guarantees that they will reach Heaven.

Another way to put this is that the age of accountability encourages people to murder their children – and people have started figuring this out. I read in the news just the other day of a mother who was worried that the Tribulation was about to begin, so she tried to murder her preteen children so that they would be saved. The whole reason she did this was because she thought that all children went straight to Heaven, so killing them

would save their souls. Now, what she tried to do was *wrong* and was a terrible sin, but it's the logical consequence of the age of accountability.

Surely you can see that any doctrine that encourages parents to murder their own children is a demonic one. The Bible is clear that God *hates* people who murder children. It upsets 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 despite this, I'm still 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? I don't think so. Murder is *not* one of the paths to salvation.

## EVERYONE IS HELD ACCOUNTABLE

If that is really the case then where does the Bible teach these things? I've heard people say "Well, God doesn't hold you accountable if you didn't know your actions were sinful." That 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, he gets a free pass because he didn't know any better.” If that were truly the case then the smart thing to do would be to gather up all the Bibles in the world and burn them. Then *everyone* would be ignorant about God's will and so God would give everyone a free pass! If God overlooks ignorant sins then sending out missionaries is a horrible crime, because it educates the ignorant. God would have given those poor natives a free pass, but now that we've told them the truth they are in trouble. (Do you see how ridiculous that line of thinking is? Do you see how it leads straight to madness?)

As you can see, *God required payment even for sins done in ignorance. Those sins were not automatically forgiven and covered.* 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 God still required him to seek forgiveness. So, then, it *doesn't matter* if we know that we are sinning or not. A sin is still a sin. God still holds it against us, and we must still 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 attached to it. It doesn't say “The wages of sin is death *if* you



knew that you were sinning, *if* you have reached adulthood, *if* you are mentally competent, and *if* you are capable of understanding the gospel.” Nor does it say “The wages of sin is death for some people, but not for children, or the insane, or the unborn, or those who have never heard about Jesus.” It doesn't say *any* of those things. Instead 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 “all those who have reached the age of accountability have sinned, but children are innocent and aren't held responsible.” People desperately wish that 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 that are 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.” The problem with that idea is that the Bible explicitly 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 who then somehow fall into sin. We are sinners from the very first moment that our life begins – and life begins at the moment of

conception, *not* when we are born. (Incidentally, if life didn't start at conception then it would be impossible to be a sinner at that stage. After all, you can't possibly be a sinner if you're not alive and don't even exist! Sinning is only possible when there is personhood – and that means that life must start at conception.)

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

**Psalm 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 and are 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 are not held responsible for the things that they do? No, He 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 not a big deal 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 not get a divorce, and he goes on to discuss them. 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 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 righteous in the sight of God”, but he doesn't say that. Paul actually talks about children *that are not saved!*

## THE FINAL PROOF

Now, you might be thinking “Surely there's some other explanation for all this! Maybe these verses 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 this 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 and asked 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 ten 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 must have been at least ten children in those cities. In fact, there were probably *thousands* of children. *Yet God did not find ten righteous people!* If all children are innocent and holy in God's sight then God should have spared Sodom and Gomorrah – but that's not what happened. In fact, the only people God rescued were Lot, his wife, and his two daughters. How many children from 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 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 – but it wasn't mentioned.

Nor is this the only place in the Bible where God decided to *not* rescue the children. When God commanded the Israelites to utterly annihilate the city of Jericho, how many of Jericho's children did he save? *Not a single one of them:*

**Joshua 6:16:** "And it came to pass at the seventh time, when the priests blew with the trumpets, Joshua said unto the people, Shout; for the Lord hath given you the city.

17 And the city shall be accursed, even it, and all that are therein, to the Lord: only Rahab the harlot shall live, she and all that are with her in the house, because she hid the messengers that we sent.

18 And ye, in any wise keep yourselves from the accursed thing, lest ye make yourselves accursed, when ye take of the accursed thing, and make the camp of Israel a curse, and trouble it.

19 But all the silver, and gold, and vessels of brass and iron, are consecrated unto the Lord: they shall come into the treasury of the Lord.

20 So the people shouted when the priests blew with the trumpets: and it came to pass, when the people heard the sound of the trumpet, and the people shouted with a great shout, that the wall fell down flat, so that the people went up into the city, every man straight before him, and they took the city.

21 And they utterly destroyed all that was in the city, both man and woman, young and old, and ox, and sheep, and ass, with the edge of the sword."

Notice that God actually spared the life of *Rahab the harlot*, but had all the children killed. Nor did God spare any of the children of Amalek:

**I Samuel 15:2:** "Thus saith the Lord of hosts, I remember that which Amalek did to Israel, how

he laid wait for him in the way, when he came up from Egypt.

3 Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass.”

If children truly are innocent in God's sight then God could have spared Amek's children – *but He didn't*. Nor did He spare the children of the Canaanites or the children of Sodom. The only person He spared was Rahab the harlot. *Everyone else died*.

If you've never heard any of this before then these passages are probably shocking. We tend to have our own ideas about what is right and wrong and what is fair and unfair. When God comes along and says that He sees things differently we can become pretty upset, because we want to believe that God thinks the way we think. The truth is that God's ways are very different from ours:

**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?

## WHAT THE BIBLE REALLY SAYS

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 cast out demons. Jesus corrected them and

said that wasn't worth getting excited about. Instead they should be rejoicing about something that mattered a great deal more:

**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.”

Now, at first 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 was cast into the Lake of Fire, where they would be tormented day and night, forever and ever. However, all those whose names *were* written would be saved and given eternal life. In other words, whether you ended up in Heaven or Hell is completely determined by whether your name is written in that Book. That is why the Lord said that the disciples should rejoice because their name was written in it, since that meant they had

eternal life to look forward to.

So, then, that brings up a question: when is your name written down in that all-important Book? Is it when you become saved? Actually, no. All of the names in that Book were written in it *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 then that means your name was written there long before you were born. In fact, you were saved *because* your name was written there. The whole reason you came to faith in Christ *is because your name was written in the Lamb's Book of Life*. That is why God gave you saving faith. You did not choose God; instead He chose you. The matter was decided a very, very long time ago.

This is another truth that is very unpopular, but it is true all the same. As was discussed in the previous chapter, 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 God is 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 actually hated Esau. God didn't hate Esau's sin; what He hated was *Esau himself*. We like to say that "God hates sin but loves the sinner," but in this case 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 that 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 dislike Esau. No, what happened was that before either of them were born God chose to love one of them and hate the other – *and there was nothing either of them could do about it*. God extended His mercy to Jacob and He withheld it from Esau simply to prove that people are saved based on God's divine choice.

I realize that this seems grossly unfair – and that is the very next point that 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 probably some of the most unpopular verses in the Bible. Make no mistake: God saves some people and does not save others based on *His divine choice*. He chooses to have mercy on some people and He chooses to withhold His

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 how much you want it. God is the one who 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 another point: if God chooses to save some people but not others then why does God hold people accountable? After all, it's not their fault, is it? Paul had 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 who created the universe and He is the one who formed the human race. God does not owe 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?

What does all that have to do with children? Simply this: although we are saved by repentance and faith in Jesus, the reason that we have faith is because God chose to write our

name down in the Book of Life when He created the world. *God chose us*, and because of that we are saved. Theologians call this “irresistible grace”, and it is very unpopular – but it is exactly what the Bible teaches.

Whether or not children are saved depends entirely upon whether their names are written in the Book of Life. If they *are* written in it then they will believe and inherit eternal life, and if they are not then they won't. The Bible makes no exceptions; this policy holds true for everyone.

You might wonder, how can an unborn baby possibly have saving faith? That whole idea seems ridiculous – but that is exactly what we find in the Bible. Take a look at what happened when Mary visited Elizabeth while Mary was still pregnant with Jesus:

**Luke 1:41:** “And it came to pass, that, when Elisabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost:

42 And she spake out with a loud voice, and said, Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb.

43 And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?

44 For, lo, as soon as the voice of thy salutation sounded in mine ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy.”

Why did the unborn John the Baptist leap for joy? Because Mary was carrying the unborn Jesus, and John the Baptist rejoiced in that. Even though John *hadn't even been born yet*, he recognized who Jesus was. John the Baptist had saving faith *before* he was born – and the reason he had it is because God gave it to him. God is fully capable of giving saving faith to

people of all ages.

The bottom line is that if God chooses to have mercy on a person then *they will be saved*, no matter what the person's age or circumstances. If God chooses to withhold His 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 an *adult* is saved? Remember, the wicked disciple Judas fooled everyone. When Jesus said "One of you will betray me", no one said "Oh, I bet it's Judas! He's got those shifty eyes." The other disciples had no idea who the traitor might be. *Judas fooled the eleven people on Earth who were the closest to Jesus*. 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 the matter is in God's hands. He is the one who makes the call, and He is perfect, holy, loving, and just. God will save all those whom He chooses to save – and that applies to both children and adults.