

The Age Of Accountability

One of the most widely-held beliefs in the church today is the age of accountability. This doctrine teaches that God only holds you responsible for your sins once you're old enough to understand the gospel. . Those who die before they reach this age automatically go to Heaven because God doesn't hold their sins against them. The only people who actually need to be saved are those who reach the age of accountability. In other words, all children go to Heaven.

The exact age when God starts holding people accountable for their sins is a matter of debate. Some preachers claim it's different for each person, and that a few people (such as the insane or mentally handicapped) never reach this age at all

I attended Baptist churches for a number of years and during that time I heard many sermons about this doctrine. One thing I noticed was that in all those sermons not one of them tried to use the Bible to justify it. *Not a single one.* To me this immediately raised a red flag. If this teaching is true then there must be some support for it in the Scriptures. If that's the case then why not show the proof for all the world to see? Preachers use the Bible to defend doctrine all the time. Why is this topic any different?

I encountered this same problem when talking to other Christians who believed this doctrine. No one ever told me the reason they began believing it was because they found it taught it in the Bible. In every case the reason people believed it was because they couldn't believe 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 wasn't important. People had an emotional need to believe it was true and so they held on to it. They might not have been able to point to any Bible verses that taught it, but they believed it all the same.

I'm not saying that no one has ever tried to defend this teaching with the Bible. Instead I'm saying that many people

believe this for emotional reasons, for Biblical ones. The reason this is widely-held belief is because people want it to be true.

However, are they right? Is the age of accountability a Biblical doctrine or is it just a myth? Let's take a look and see.

If you study this topic you'll discover that there aren't many people who try to defend this belief by quoting the Bible. 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 if they had no idea they were sinning. They'll also say that it's offensive to God to require faith from someone who's mentally incapable of understanding what faith even is.

But most of the time you won't see them using the Bible to defend any of 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. If God doesn't hold people responsible for sinning out of ignorance then it should be a simple matter to show us where the Bible says that. If God doesn't hold mentally challenged people responsible for their sins then show the Bible verses which back that up. If these things were truly obvious then it would be easy provide the proof – and yet it's just not there.

I've only found two Bible verses which have been used to support the age of accountability. The first 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 ask “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's take a look at the context. David had committed adultery with Bathsheba gotten her pregnant.

Eventually David sought forgiveness for what he had done. God forgave him but there were consequences:

2 Samuel 12:13-14: “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. 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.”

As a consequence of what David had done, the Lord decided to kill his child. David begged God to spare his son but God didn't and the child died. That's when David said 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 this verse proves their case. They teach that “I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me” means “since the child died before he was old enough to believe in God, he's 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'd end up in Hell.” When you put it like that it seems ridiculous but that's what many preachers claim that verse means.

I think that interpretation vastly overstates what David was 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 was saying is this: “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. David was definitely *not* trying to make a blanket statement that applies to all children who have ever been born. David definitely 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's one other verse which could be used to defend the age of accountability. It's 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 this verse looks quite definitive. I can 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 possible that the reason their sins are forgiven is *because* they have known the Father? These children are saved *not* by the age of accountability but by *their relationship with the Father and their faith in Him*.

You might be wondering why this matters. One reason is because the age of accountability has major implications. 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 start believing in God. If you die *before* that happens you'll go to Heaven, but if you die *afterward* you'll go to Hell. If a 13-year-old teenager has already reached the age of accountability but has *not* believed in Jesus, he'll burn in Hell forever if he dies in a car accident. However, if that car accident had happened before he reached the age of accountability, he would have ended up in Heaven. By virtue of getting one year older he lost his ticket to Heaven and had to regain it before he was condemned to Hell forever.

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 then there's a very real chance many of them would never have believed in Christ. That means 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 children in order to make sure they reach Heaven, and they should be. It's a horrifying idea and is deeply wrong. *But that's exactly what the age of accountability teaches*. It couldn't be more clear: if all children are born saved but then lose their salvation when they reach adulthood then that means aborting them before they're born guarantees they'll reach Heaven.

There have been mothers who were so worried about their children being sent to Hell that they killed them in order to save their souls. The reason they did that was because they believed all children go straight to Heaven, so killing them saves their souls. Now, that's the wrong thing to do and is deeply awful, but it's the logical consequence of the age of accountability and some people do think that way.

The Bible is clear that God *hates* people who murder children. It upsets Him *tremendously*. Jesus put it this way:

Matthew 18:6: “But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea.”

One of the reasons God sent the Israelites into exile at Babylon is because they were burning their children alive as human sacrifices to pagan gods:

Jeremiah 32:35: “And they built the high places of Baal, which are in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to cause their sons and their daughters to pass through the fire unto Molech; which I commanded them not, neither came it into my mind, that they should do this abomination, to cause Judah to sin.”

The Israelites were murdering their children and God *did not like it*. Yet am I supposed to believe that thanks to the age of accountability, this vile act of human sacrifice (which God hates) actually *guarantees* salvation?

If that's true then where's the Biblical evidence for it? Where does the Bible teach these things? I've heard people say that God doesn't hold you accountable for your sins if you don't know that you're sinning, but that's not true. Take a look for yourself:

Leviticus 5:15-16: “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; 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.

God didn't say “If a soul sins in ignorance, it's fine because he didn't know any better.” Instead God instituted a special sacrifice so 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. That means it doesn't matter if we know that we're sinning. A sin is still a sin and God still requires us to seek forgiveness for it.

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.”

That verse doesn't have any conditions attached to it. It doesn't say “The wages of sin is death *if* you knew you were sinning, *if* you've reached adulthood, *if* you're mentally competent, and *if* you're capable of understanding the gospel.” Nor does it say “The wages of sin is death for some people, but not for children, the insane, the unborn, or those who've never heard about Jesus.” It doesn't say *any* of those things. It's clear, direct, and to the point: the wages of sin is death. Period. It's death *for everyone* because everyone 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've reached the age of accountability have sinned, but children are innocent and God doesn't hold them responsible.” People 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 which are committed in ignorance. The wages of *all* sin – even ignorant sin – is death, no matter how old you are.

Some people claim that this doesn't apply to infants because they're innocent. The problem is that the Bible explicitly says that even the *unborn* are sinners:

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

The psalmist wasn't saying that he was born out of adultery. No, he was confessing that he was a sinner *from conception*. None of us are born innocent. We're not good people who fall into sin. We're sinners from the moment our life begins.

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's *from the womb*. When do they become evil? Is it once they become teenagers? No, it's *as soon as they're born*. This idea that children are born innocent isn't Biblical. Psalm 58:3 really does say that the wicked were evil *as babies*.

Does God say that children aren't held responsible for the things 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.”

This verse doesn't say that it's fine when children misbehave because they're young and haven't reached the age of accountability yet. Instead it says that even children are known by their actions. They're capable of doing good *and* evil. The idea that children are sinless isn't Biblical.

There's also this passage:

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."

In this verse the apostle Paul was examining the situation where one person in a marriage was saved and the other was not. Should the Christian divorce the unbelieving spouse? Paul taught that there are some cases when they shouldn't get a divorce. One of them is verse 14, when 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 then the children *would be unclean*.

As you can see, children are divided into two camps: those who are holy *and those who are not*. This would have been an outstanding time for Paul to say that all children are holy and all children are saved, but he doesn't say that. Instead he talks about children who are unclean in the sight of God.

You might be thinking that surely there's some other explanation for all this! God must consider *all* children to be holy and righteous. There's actually a passage we can study to find the answer once and for all. In the Old Testament there was a time when God was determined to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. When Abraham learned 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 10 righteous people so He destroyed the cities:

Genesis 19:24-25: "Then the LORD rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and

fire from the LORD out of heaven; 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 didn't find even ten righteous people.* If all children are innocent and holy in God's sight then He would have spared Sodom and Gomorrah on the grounds that children are holy, there were more than 10 children there, and therefore God wouldn't destroy the holy with the wicked. But that didn't 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 didn't happen. If children are sinless and God doesn't hold them accountable for their sins then Romans 3 or 1 Corinthians 7 would have been a great place to mention that fact, but it doesn't.

I realize all of this can be hard to hear. People tend to have their own ideas about what's right and wrong and what's fair and unfair. When God says that He sees things differently, some people reject it. They want to believe that God thinks the way they do even though He usually doesn't. That's something 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's the answer? If the age of accountability isn't true then what *is* true? What does the Bible say about what happens when a child dies before he's born?

Let's start in the book of Luke. There was a time when the disciples went to Jesus and were excited because they had been

casting out demons. The Lord said that was nice, but it wasn't worth getting 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? It actually makes a lot of difference:

Revelation 20:12-15: “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. 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. And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire.”

Anyone whose name isn't found written in the Lamb's Book of Life (which is a real book, by the way) will be cast into the Lake of Fire. Those people will be tormented day and night for all of eternity. However, all those whose names *are* written in the Book will be given eternal life in the world to come. Whether you end up in Heaven or Hell is determined by whether your name is written in that Book. That's why Jesus said that His disciples were to rejoice because their names were written in it, because that means they had eternal life.

That brings up a question. When is your name written in

that all-important book? Is it when you're saved? Nope. If your name is there it was written down *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.”

The Book of Life was completed when God created the world. If you're saved then your name was written there long before you were ever born. In fact, the reason you were saved is *because* your name was written there.

You see, people do *not* go to God and get saved. Instead God goes to people *and saves them*. From our perspective it looks like we're coming to God, but in reality what we're seeing is God saving us.

The apostle Paul explained this doctrine in Romans:

Romans 9:11-13: “(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;) It was said unto her, The elder shall serve the younger. 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*. Some people say that God hates sin but loves the sinner, but in this case it was the sinner who God hated.

What's 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 had been good and Esau had been bad, 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 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 in order to prove that people are saved based on His divine choice alone.

This seems very unfair – which is the next point Paul brings up:

Romans 9:14-16: “What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? God forbid. 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. So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy.”

God saves some people and doesn't save others based on *His divine choice*¹. He chooses to have mercy on some and 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 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 but not others then why does He hold people accountable for their sins? After all, it's not their fault, is it? Paul addressed that next:

Romans 9:18-21: “Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth. Thou wilt say then unto me, Why doth he yet find fault? For who hath resisted his will? Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him

1 For more information on this topic, see: <http://stories.cyragon.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Divine-Choice.pdf>

that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus?
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's the one who made the universe and He's the one who created the human race. God doesn't owe any of us anything, including salvation and mercy. All of us have sinned and 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 9:22-23: "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: And that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory,"

Both the righteous *and* the unrighteousness bring glory to God, although in very different ways. Theologians call this the "grand demonstration." Before the universe was created there were aspects of God's character which were hidden and had never been revealed in all the ages of eternity. For example, God couldn't demonstrate 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 because no one had ever sinned.

But when God created the world and mankind sinned, the situation changed. Now the aspects of God's character which had previously been hidden could be clearly seen. The wicked allow God to demonstrate His wrath, power, and longsuffering nature.

The saints are demonstrations of His mercy, grace, and compassion. Both the wicked and the righteous glorify God by revealing His character and allowing Him to demonstrate who He is.

What does that have to do with children? Simply this: the reason we have saving faith – the reason we've repented of our sins and believed in Jesus – is because God chose to write our name down in the Book of Life when He created the world. *God chose us* and therefore we're saved.

Whether children are saved depends entirely on whether God wrote their names down in His Book of Life. If they are then they will surely inherit eternal life. If they're not then they won't. The Bible makes no exceptions to this policy. If God chooses to have mercy on someone then they will surely be saved no matter how old they are or how insane they may be. If God chooses to withhold that mercy then they'll be lost.

Can we know for sure if a child was saved? Well, stop and think about this: can you know for sure if another *adult* is saved? Remember, the disciple Judas had everyone fooled. When Jesus said that one of His disciples would betray Him, no one pointed at Judas! The other disciples had no idea who the traitor might be. *Judas fooled the eleven people on Earth who were closest to Jesus*. If you can't tell if other adults are saved then why would children would be any different?

This matter is in God's hands, not ours. He's the one who make the decision, and He is perfect, holy, loving, and just. The Bible doesn't tell us that God has a policy of saving all children. It also doesn't tell us whose names are written in His Book of Life. It wouldn't surprise me at all to find out that many children are indeed saved – not because of the age of accountability (which doesn't exist), but because God chose to have mercy on them. In this matter we have to trust God – and He most definitely can be trusted.