

## What is the Age of Accountability?

Many denominations have traditionally argued for a certain "age of accountability" at which time children become morally responsible for sin. We see this implied even in our own Baptist tradition as the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message states regarding man "as soon as they are capable of moral action, they become transgressors and are under condemnation."

Is this what the Bible teaches? Are children innocent and therefore free from condemnation before a certain age?

There are certainly many attempts to find an age of accountability in the Scriptures. Appeals have been made to Paul's comments in Romans 7:9 that once he was "alive apart from the law," God's provision in Exodus 30:14 for those 20 or older to make offerings, or Jesus' interaction with children to somehow demonstrate a time at which children are innocent, but I do not find these attempts compelling. Without exhaustively dealing with these texts, here are a few points:

1. Romans 7 has been interpreted in a dozen different ways by thousands of commentators over the centuries. Is Paul speaking autobiographically or of mankind in general? Is he speaking of pre-conversion or post-conversion experiences? These are really difficult questions, and I encourage you to check out a good commentary on Romans to glean some help (Moo and Schreiner's commentaries are really solid). Overall, verse 9 should not be taken to teach that Paul was spiritually alive prior to hearing the commandment, but rather that there was a clear distinction in his experience of "life" prior to hearing and after. He was alive (in a sense) before hearing the law and had no feelings of guilt and shame, but the law revealed his death and guilt.
2. The Exodus passage does not teach that only those who were 20 or older were morally responsible. The context is teaching the census tax and thus the contrast is not those who are responsible with those who are not, but rather those who are subject to this tax and those who are not. If we really want to know who it was that the Old Testament declared an offering for, we need look no further than the Passover, which was for the entire household, not merely the adults.
3. In regards to Jesus' interaction with children, I would respond that Jesus also drew near to tax collectors and sinners. Does that therefore mean that sinners are not sinful?

The Scriptures are clear that all men (Jesus alone excluded) are utterly sinful and thus subject to God's just wrath. We need to feel the weight of that reality. We need to feel the gravity of personal and corporate sin.

Something went horribly wrong in the garden and the ripples of that horror affect everything around us. Our relationships with God, ourselves, others and the rest of creation have been horrifically fractured as a result of man's idolatry and pride. One trespass, one sin, one bite and all creation has been subjected to futility according to Romans 8:20. Furthermore, this one sin has affected all future generations as Paul writes in Romans 5:18 "one trespass led to condemnation for all men." As a result of our union with Adam in the mass of humanity, we are sinful and therefore under condemnation. Infant, child, teen, adult, and senior citizen -- all alike are sinful.

This sinful state is not merely the result of the choices that we make, but is embedded into the very essence of fallen humanity. We are "by nature children of wrath" (Ephesians 2:3). In other words, sin is natural to the human heart and mind. It is who we are as a result of the fall. It is not merely learned behavior, and thus we would all do well to confess with David, "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me" (Psalm 51:5).

Because man is utterly sinful, the Bible describes us as "dead in our trespasses and sins" (Ephesians 2:1). Though we breathe and our hearts beat, yet we abide in a "domain of darkness" (Colossians 1:13), separated from true life which is found in a love for and reverential fear of God. This fear does not exist in the unregenerate human heart as Romans 3 declares that "none is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for good...there is no fear of God before their eyes."

Freedom from the condemnation due sin is not to be found in the womb, but rather at the cross. In Christ Jesus we find that there is no condemnation (Romans 8:1) and thus any who are in Him experience freedom from the wrath that was naturally theirs as a result of their being in Adam (the contrast between being "in Adam" and "in Christ" is explicitly referenced in Romans 5:12-21; in Adam we find condemnation and death and in Christ we find freedom and life).

A typical reaction to the biblical teaching of a depraved human nature is the conclusion that children who die in infancy are

eternally lost, but this is not a necessary consequence. If salvation is wholly a work of God whereby He regenerates a sinful heart, then it is entirely possible for Him to sovereignly apply salvation for children, infants, and others who are intellectually unable to assent to the gospel. In the end, I have great hope for the salvation of infants, though I do not base my hope on a theoretical age of accountability, but rather on a merciful and loving God who saves sinners, whether they lie in a womb, a mother's arms, or a nursing home.

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