

THE AGE OF ACCOUNTABILITY

By Richard Jordan

Although we have no way of knowing how many infants have died during the past, the present abortion rate in this country alone is raising the figure at a staggering pace. Add to this the various reports from around the world of mass starvations, political exterminations, etc., and it is only natural that there should be a growing interest in the spiritual state and salvation of these infants as well as those children who die before they attain an age of accountability. For those thus interested, but especially for those who have had the heartbreak of having a little one taken in death, we trust this article will be helpful.

ACCOUNTABILITY

That there is an age of accountability is clearly taught in Scripture. This does not mean, however, that an infant is not a sinner or that he is first “saved” and then “lost” again. If the latter were true, in what sense would he have ever been “saved”? Rather, Scripture indicates that although from conception infants have a sinful nature (e.g. Psalm 51:5) God does not hold them accountable for their sins until they reach the point of personal choice.

An important passage in this connection is Romans 5:12-14.

“Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned:

“(For until the law sin was in the world: but sin is not imputed when there is no law.

“Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over them that had not sinned after the similitude of Adam's transgression, who is the figure of him that was to come.”

Although all men were *in Adam* and thus clearly sinners by nature and descent, notice that Paul tells us that “sin is not imputed when there is no law”—that is, when there is no “knowledge of sin,” “for by the law is the knowledge of sin” (Romans 3:20). The Apostle says later in this same epistle:

“... I had not known sin but by the law ...”

“For I was alive without the law once: but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died” (Romans 7:7.9).

Clearly God does not hold as morally accountable those who have not come to a “knowledge of sin”—those who have “not sinned after the similitude of Adam's transgression” (i.e. those who have not knowingly violated a specific command as Adam did).

Even the Old Testament sheds light on this point, for it also clearly teaches that God recognizes some are not morally accountable. Consider the following passages:

“And should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and *also* much cattle?” (Jonah 4:11)

“For before the child shall know to refuse the evil, and choose the good, the land that thou abhorrest shall be forsaken of both her kings” (Isaiah 7:16).

“Moreover your little ones, which ye said should be a prey, and your children, which in that day had no knowledge between good and evil, they shall go in thither, and unto them will I give it, and they shall possess it” (Deuteronomy 1:29).

It seems best simply to recognize that the age of accountability varies from individual and especially from society to society. The fact remains, however, that the Scriptures clearly teach that God recognizes an age of accountability. When an individual reaches the point in his or her life where they do possess the “knowledge between good and evil” they have arrived. This is why it is extremely important to always keep the good news of God’s love and grace before young children so that when they do perceive sin to be sin they also know of God’s wonderful provision in behalf of sinners.

THE DEATH OF “LITTLE ONES”

And what about the little ones who die *before* they reach the point of personal accountability? Again the Old Testament is helpful. David said concerning his little child who had just died, “I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me” (II Samuel 12:23). Does this not imply that David had implicit faith that his little child, like David himself, was saved?

Still in another dispensation than ours Christ declared:

“Even so it is not the will of your Father which is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish” (Matthew 18:14).

Infants are saved if they die before becoming morally accountable. Saved—not because they are innocent, nor because of religious ceremony,¹ they are saved because Christ died for sinners—for them, and because it is not God’s will that even one of them should perish.

At this point Deuteronomy 1:39 is again helpful, for it indicates that God can give gifts to those who are not yet personally accountable—and that He can give those gifts apart from their personal choice. Thus He is perfectly free to save all who die before they reach the age of accountability and it is evident from Scripture that He does. He foreknew which little ones would die and He has chosen to save them. That He is free to do so is indisputable since “God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them” (II Corinthians 5:19).

INFANT BAPTISM

One further point to remember: certainly there is *nothing* in the Bible—not even half a verse—that says that babies must be baptized, much less that baptism with water could possibly save them or make them saved. Mark 16:16, Acts 2:38 and a volume of other Scriptures make it clear that the one baptized had first to believe and repent. Even when households were baptized, it was always because they had believed—as in Acts 16:33,34, “*believing* in God with all his house.”

All this, of course, maintained while water baptism was in order, but when God raised up Paul, that *other* apostle, he states clearly, “Christ sent me *not* to baptize” and informs us that now “by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body” (I Corinthians 1:17; I Corinthians 12:13). This is the one baptism for today and has replaced the water ceremonies of the former dispensation. With water baptism no longer having a place in God’s program, infant—and adult—baptism is in fact a moot point.

THE PARENTS’ RESPONSIBILITY

For parents of infants and young children, Proverbs 22:6 is an important principle:

“Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.”

Surely this is reason enough to bend every effort to know and understand God’s Word rightly divided—else how can we train that little one “in the way he should go?” We parents have a tremendous responsibility to see that our children from the beginning are surrounded with such influences, examples and instructions that they will be ready to receive Christ as soon as they are capable of that choice.

For any dear reader who has experienced the sorrow of having a precious little one die, the following epitaph from an Edinburgh church grave yard expresses as clearly as possible the truth of Scripture and the confidence of our hearts:

Bold infidelity turn pale and die;
Beneath this stone four
sleeping infants lie.
Say, are they lost or saved?

If death’s by sin, they sinned
For they are here.
If heaven’s by works
In heaven they can’t appear.

Ah, Reason, how depraved.
Revere the Bible’s sacred page.
The knot’s untied:
They live, for Jesus died.

ⁱ Remember that David's baby did not live long enough even to be circumcised.