

Is the Age of Accountability Biblical?

Tim Conway | illbehonest.com

Question: Of course, I should have expected that this one was coming. Age of accountability. Si - he says, "A five year old missing girl's body was found recently encased in cement along a river bed in Michigan." Now, at this point, Si heard a news event. He's using that as kind of a launching pad for his question. He's making some assumptions now. "Let's assume this child never heard the Gospel. Could a Christian rightly comfort the parents of this child by saying that the child went immediately into Heaven? Do all children under a certain age go to Heaven? Do children go to hell if they never heard the Gospel? Is there an age of accountability?"

Discussion:

Tim: Now, bottom line, the Bible does not say. But the Bible does say some things about some things that we can glean from and make some dogmatic statements. So, the first thing that I would say is this: The Apostle Paul said this. 2 Timothy 3:15 - maybe some of you know this verse. "The sacred writings..." speaking of the Bible. He says, "they're able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." Well, why would I read that? Because the Bible wasn't given to answer every question that we can possibly ask. But you know what the Bible was given for? It was given for us who can think and can reason to know the way by which to be saved. The fact is the Bible wasn't given specifically to tell us how people who can't reason might be saved if they could be saved. It's given to those who can reason. "The sacred writings are given to make a person wise for salvation." And you see, a lot of times, people get caught up with questions that they want answers for, but you know what's more important? The most important thing for Si is to know the way of life and to make sure that he has it. But now, that doesn't mean that this question about children doesn't have practical use. I'll guarantee you, it has pastoral use. When you come across a mother that's lost a little child, what are you going to tell them? You know, is there anything we can say to comfort them?

Okay, you know where people typically go here? They typically go to David. Some of you guys know that David had an illicit relationship with Bathsheba. That's usually well-known. He committed adultery. He committed murder. But, there was a child born. You folks know about the child. 2 Samuel 12:23 You know that David was fasting. He was fasting asking God to preserve the life of this little child. He saw some servants whispering. He figured, well, the child's dead. He went and washed himself. He went and ate. They wondered, well, this is odd. Why did you fast then, and now the child's dead? It seems like you would fast and pray now? You would mourn now? He said, "now he's dead. Why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me." And a lot of people have gone there and they say, well, see, David was a man after God's own heart. We know David is a saved man. We know David is in glory. If David is going to go to where the child is and David is a saved man, then the child must have been saved.

Now that's how folks would reason. One thing I would say in the Old Testament is that they didn't have a super developed theology of heaven and hell. Now listen, some things are said in the Old Testament like this: God said - now think about this - the same logic could be used in other places. Such as, think about Abraham. Is Abraham in Heaven? Prove it. Luke 16 - that's a good one. Lazarus went to Abraham's bosom, right? Which means Abraham was on the good side. And Jesus said too, many will come from east and west and they'll sit down and they'll recline in the Kingdom of Heaven with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. Obviously, he's there. Right? I mean, Romans 4 is all about that. Right? He was justified by faith. He's a justified man. Okay, here's what God says to him in Genesis 15:15. He says, "you shall go to your fathers in peace. You shall be buried in a good old age." Now here's what God said to him. You're going to go to your fathers. Okay? Logical deduction, all his fathers must be in Heaven, right? And yet the Bible distinctly tells us that's not the case. The Bible tells us that his father and his father's father - Joshua 24:2 - "Joshua said to all the people, thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, long ago your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates. Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor, they served other gods. God took our father Abraham from beyond the river and led him through all the land of Canaan." You know what? Basically, all the forefathers of Abraham were idolaters. And there's no indication that they turned to the Lord. So I mean, the very point that it's said that he's going to be with his fathers, a lot of times they had this mindset that you know, the dead are kind of going all to the same place. And they talked that way.

In fact, you know what comes to my mind right off - I wasn't thinking about it earlier - when the witch at Endor raised up Samuel, didn't Samuel - now is Samuel in Heaven? We would say yes, he was a righteous man. Saul, I believe, was a lost man. And yet, you know what Samuel says to Saul? You're going to be where I am tomorrow. And I don't believe that that's an indication that Samuel was an apparition - a demonic apparition. And I don't think it necessarily means that Saul was a saved man. I believe what it means is there's an abode where they go to.

Anyways, all that being said, I don't think that David saying - because see, we have this kind of talk in the Old Testament that really showed that they had this idea that the dead kind of went to the same place. You don't find this distinction between heaven and hell really vividly set forth in the Old Testament. They did not have an accomplished theology of that there. So I don't believe that you can make with these other things - the witch at Endor and this thing said about Abraham - it's very similar language. And I think you could come to the same kind of deductions, which you obviously don't want to come to, if you start using that same reasoning with these other cases. And we could probably multiply these. I know that in Chronicles and Kings, it likewise says things about even maybe wicked kings going to the place of their fathers or sleeping with their fathers. And some of those fathers were righteous men. Some of those fathers were not righteous men. I think it was just a way that the Old Testament saints viewed things. So I say, you know, I don't think you can dogmatically prove anything by that.

Now what can we prove? What can we say dogmatically? I can tell you this, children from the womb are not innocent. We can prove that beyond any shadow of a doubt. How? Well, it's a simple test. We've already said tonight, Romans 3:10. "None is righteous." That includes every

little child, and in fact, David himself says, "I was brought forth in iniquity." Psalm 51:5, "...and in sin did my mother conceive me." You know what? Little children are conceived in sin. Little children are not righteous. Little children are not innocent. Little children are conceived in sin. From day one, the moment they're conceived it's in sin.

Let me tell you something else that's dogmatic. Little children die. You say, well, that's obvious. But, hey, the wages of sin is what? Death. Why do little children die? If they're innocent, why do they die? Well, we've already established, they're not innocent. There's none righteous. We know that everybody is conceived in sin. They die. That's one of the great evidences that there is indeed guilt associated with them. And then let's just think about the Romans 5 argument of Paul. Just the fact that, listen to this, you guys know this. 1 Corinthians 15:22 gives us some of the same information that Romans 5 gives us. "As in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive." The fact is, all in Adam die. Why? Because all in Adam have sinned. All in Adam are guilty of Adam's sin. All in Adam are condemned. All in Adam are under the judgment of God. You know what the Scriptures say? We were children of wrath like the rest of mankind. You know what that means? All the rest of mankind - children of wrath. Little children are conceived children of wrath. They're in Adam. They're guilty of Adam's sin. They're guilty of original sin. They are under the condemnation of God. Death is a reality in their lives. Death is a wage of sin. Clearly, they die. Clearly, the implications of sin are upon their life. Clearly, they're not conceived in innocence. Clearly, they were conceived in iniquity. Those things we know to be true.

I'll tell you something else. God had infants slaughtered. That's another thing we know absolutely for certain. I'll just give you one instance - 1 Samuel 15:3, "Go and strike Amalek and devote to destruction all that they have. Do not spare them. Kill both man and woman, child and infant." I mean, I'm in Judges now, but I just recently read through Joshua. I was imagining what it would have been like to have been an Israelite going into those Canaanite villages where they were told to destroy everybody. I mean, folks, when those walls of Jericho came down, there was only one lady and her family spared. Everybody else, under the sword. You think about going in with the sword. You've got pregnant mothers. They slaughtered them on the spot. You've got a little infant - they slaughtered them. And that was God ordained. Now you think about God having little children put to death. Does that speak of innocence?

But then let's go here, we know that the Bible teaches us as well God is good. Psalm 52:1. "The goodness of God endures continually." How about this? "God is just." Deuteronomy 32:4. "God is a God of faithfulness and without iniquity. Just and upright is He." And you know what? God didn't need to offer mankind any way of salvation, and yet He does. And we know that Scripturally. God has offered man a way of salvation. Call upon the name of the Lord and you will be saved. I'll tell you what, little children, little infants, little children in their mother's wombs, cannot call on the Lord. They don't have the faculties to believe. And I'll tell you this, if there is another way of salvation, God never tells us it. Right? There's only one way of salvation we know of in all the Scripture. And little children are incapable of it. Right? I can dogmatically say that. How shall I be saved? Call upon the name of the Lord. They told the Philippian jailer,

"believe on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shall be saved." There's one way given among men. It's in Christ and it's by faith in Christ. There is no other way. There's no other way given in Scripture. It can't be argued. Little children do not have the faculties. There are little children aborted in their mother's wombs, or miscarried in their mother's wombs, at a day after, at a month after, at a week after conception. There's no faculty there for them to believe. At least, that we know of. Not that we can imagine. There are people born retarded that we can't imagine have faculties. If there is another way of salvation, we don't know about it.

But then let me say this, and this is really the last thing I would say on this subject. Romans 1:18, "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them because God has shown it to them. For His invisible attributes, namely His eternal power and divine nature have been clearly perceived ever since the creation of the world in the things that have been made, so they are without excuse." Can I tell you something? God damns men who have never heard the Gospel. God damns men that have never heard the name of Jesus Christ. And He is absolutely just in doing so. You know why? Because what can be known about God has been revealed in the creation so that they are without excuse.

What I would say is this, definitely, God tells us and He wants to make it clear that those that don't hear are justly condemned and they are without excuse. Now the case could be made for children that they have an excuse. They never had an opportunity to reject the light. So it may be that in light of that, they have an excuse by which God in His mercies - and because they're in Adam, what Christ did on the cross, although they may not have ever committed any of their actual sin, condemnation came upon all men through Adam. And you know what? It may be that in the death of Christ on that cross, it may be that He cancelled out Adam's sin. And it may be that there is a way that God has made that we know not of and is not expressly declared in the Scripture because they are without excuse. But you see, all I'm trying to say is what the Scripture says. And men, oh boy, they are so dogmatic on both sides. You can go talk to one of our favorite missionaries over in China, and he does not believe it's consistent with God that God would have them struck dead and then usher them straight into glory. He believes there's an inconsistency. And yet on the other hand, one of our other favorite patron saints of old, Charles Spurgeon was dogmatic that all children - and of course, I think the safe thing to say is all elect children are in Heaven. Because the fact is that when you boil it all down, and I know John MacArthur wrote a book on it and he's dogmatic, and I know John Piper just recently lost a little grandchild just right after it was born. And he doesn't get real dogmatic. I've heard him before, he appeals to this text in Romans that maybe they have an excuse. The fact is I've given you some things I think we can be dogmatic about, and there's just some things we can't be.