

Can a Child Be Saved Before the Age of Accountability

There is a certain point in the life of an individual when he becomes fully responsible to God for his misdeeds. Some people feel a child does not even commit a single sin until he reaches a certain age, and thereby is not responsible to God for anything prior. They affirm that salvation is unnecessary because there hasn't been any judgment. There are many opinions as to when that point of accountability is reached.

Some feel it is age 20 because those in the wilderness who were younger than 20 were not held responsible for refusing to go into the Promised Land and thus were permitted to enter, albeit after wandering in the desert for 40 years.

Others feel it must be around puberty when kids can think quite seriously about sin and its consequences. They can clearly grapple with God's holiness, the concept of hell and separation from a righteous God, the importance of faith, and the substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ.

Some give testimony that as very young children they clearly, if not fully, understood what Jesus did when He died on the cross. They affirm that they realized their sinfulness and grasped that it was right that their sin should be punished. Perhaps at age 5 or 6.

All of us who know Jesus Christ as our Savior and have children or work with other people's children have probably thought about this. If we believe the Bible to be the Word of God, we must agree with everything it says. The answer to the question of a child's salvation is not dependent on reasoning about God's goodness, or observing people's responses to religious training, or the traditions of our churches in teaching the tenets of the faith at a certain age, or confirmation classes. It is dependent wholly upon what the Bible teaches about anyone's salvation.

At the conclusion of this brief discussion, I'll give my understanding of the minimum requirements about what facts any child or adult must know and believe personally to be saved. Whatever an adult must believe to be saved, a child must also believe. And conversely, whatever is the minimum a child needs to be saved is also the maximum an adult must believe in order to have eternal life.

Sin

David says, "Behold, I was shapen in iniquity and in sin did my mother conceive me." *Psalm 51.5* He realized he had a sinful nature. *Ephesians 2.3* says we were "by nature children of wrath." Jeremiah admits that "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked." *Jer. 17.9* And all of us by experience know we are sinful. No one had to teach us nasty attitudes, mean behavior, or selfishness.

Our Unrighteousness & God's Holiness

Out of all of the people I've explained the Gospel to, not one has told me that he has never done anything he regrets. Every single one has admitted that according to his own standard, he has come short. Whether they were comparing themselves to the God of the Bible, or to other people they have met, 100% tell me in their own words that they have sinned—yes, even little kids.

Punishment for Doing Wrong is Right

Early in life a child learns that disobeying is not right. It may be handled by admonishment, loss of privileges, verbal correction, physical punishment—and sometimes improperly with hollering, screaming, threats, or intimidation.

A dog never learns why he isn't allowed on the couch: wrong time, dirty feet on the couch, couch is already full of people. But he can learn to obey. A child, however, learns that there are several reasons he *[sometimes]* isn't allowed on the couch. He also learns there are consequences to hitting, lying, and rebellion. He knows intrinsically that anger, yelling at his parents, throwing toys, and bad attitudes are connected with something "sinful" inside his heart. We know that kids may be keenly conscious of sin prior to entering school.

At what point is he accountable to God when he throws food in anger [*not in playfulness*]? Many little ones who understand the concept of right and wrong may not be able to grasp the concept that one person could take the blame for another person's crime [*substitutionary atonement*], but some can.

Certainly, the vast majority of school-aged children can process the idea that knowing to do right and choosing to do wrong is not an accident. It is intentional, and it is sin. He can also grasp what James said. "To him that knoweth to do good and doeth it not, to him it is sin." *James 4.17*

David's week-old child

There is only one passage in the Bible which speaks about the destination of those who are too young to believe, too immature to understand God's message of salvation, and too little to know why certain things he does are sin.

Nathan departed unto his house.

And the LORD struck the child that Uriah's wife bare unto David, and it was very sick. David therefore besought God for the child; and David fasted, and went in, and lay all night upon the earth. And the elders of his house arose, *and went* to him, to raise him up from the earth: but he would not, neither did he eat bread with them.

And it came to pass on the seventh day, that the child died. And the servants of David feared to tell him that the child was dead: for they said, "Behold, while the child was yet alive, we spake unto him, and he would not hearken unto our voice: how will he then vex himself, if we tell him that the child is dead?"

But when David saw that his servants whispered, David perceived that the child was dead: therefore David said unto his servants, "Is the child dead?"

And they said, "He is dead."

Then David arose from the earth, and washed, and anointed *himself*, and changed his apparel, and came into the house of the Lord, and worshipped: then he came to his own house; and when he required, they set bread before him, and he did eat.

Then said his servants unto him, "What thing *is* this that thou hast done? thou didst fast and weep for the child, *while it was* alive; but when the child was dead, thou didst rise and eat bread."

And he said, "While the child was yet alive, I fasted and wept: for I said, 'Who can tell *whether* God will be gracious to me, that the child may live?'

**2 Sa 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."**

Verse 23 may not seem like a portion of Scripture which carries a great deal of theological freight, but we can see several precepts which David grasped. This semi-clear portion in II Samuel 12.15-23 is clear enough for many to draw the following conclusions:

1. God had answered David's prayer by not allowing the child to live.
2. The grieving time was ended.
3. There was great relief that his wonderful God had answered David's earnest prayer. He took a shower and asked for supper.
4. He could not bring the child back.
5. He would someday go to the place where the child was.
6. We know that David ended his 23rd Psalm with the words, "I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." David would be in heaven with God and his own child, forever.

There is no discussion of the child's sin, unbelief, innocence, nor about the consequences of David's sin, contrition, or extended grief. Many of us simply use the words, "David's child is safe." We don't use the word "saved" because we simply don't know whether it fits. But we believe the Bible implies he is with the Heavenly Father in eternity.

While my explanation above doesn't satisfy everyone with questions about the fate of infants, very small children, aborted babies, or the mentally retarded, it is the clearest verse of Scripture we have.

Then there are encouraging portions of Jesus' teaching which we just love. "Suffer little children and forbid them not to come unto me." [*Matt 19.14 Mark 10.13-16 Luke 18.15-17*] In one of those passages there was a squirming tot so little Jesus could hold him in His arms while He preached a short sermon about the salvation of little people. In Matt 18.6 Jesus speaks of "little ones which believe in Me." Clearly an indication that the gang of little kids who followed Him were saved.

There is a Great Caution

Parents and teachers, let's be careful about the literature we use, both Sunday School curricula and books for children. The Narnia series by C.S. Lewis* states in one volume that those without Christ can enter heaven by good works. In my examination of a number of major publishing houses, I've discovered that in the pre-school material, most Bible-based Sunday School pre-school curricula never explain that salvation is by faith. They clearly give a child the impression that God is pleased with children who obey mommy & daddy, pray, love Jesus, share toys, and are sorry when they are mean.

The clear implication is, that for pre-schoolers, being nice is enough. Though the material obviously speaks against wrong, most publishing houses never mention hell or even the word "sin" for pre-schoolers. Publishers must take the viewpoint that these children are too young to be lost and so do not need to hear that salvation is by faith alone, trusting Jesus as the payment for sin.

**("fake gods" Letters of CS Lewis, p. 428 - "pagans" Reflections, p. 129 - "Buddhists" Mere Christianity, p. 176-177 - "purgatory" Malcolm, p. 108-109)*

Salvation—What is the Minimum Requirement for adults or children

What about salvation by faith in Jesus as our payment for sin? I heard a simple test. When we ask a child what does he think is necessary to go to heaven, there are 4 common answers we receive. I affirm all of these below, and I've heard all of them.

Child #1 I have to die.

Child #2 I have to pray.

Child #3 I have to be good.

Child #4 I have to believe that Jesus died for my sins.

The first child's response may indicate he is able to grasp nothing more than what he has heard that "the man died in a car crash and went to heaven to be with God." The #2 child may simply know that when he hears adults pray they say, "Our Father, which art in heaven." The 4th child clearly and accurately understands 3 or 4 theological concepts in that simple statement and may be truly born again if it is not just a memorized answer. But the #3 child also knows some theology. And he's developed the following counterfeit religion.

His is the religion of "Be-Good-ism."

God is good or holy.

God doesn't like sin.

God likes good people.

The child, himself, understands he has sinned.

He has to be nice to please God.

He is *[trying to be]* nice enough to please God.

He feels his standard for being nice might be good enough for God. He feels that God should probably adopt the child's standard.

The age at which a child can concoct this Be-Good-ism philosophy varies a great deal. I have dealt with seven-year olds who wanted to be saved but simply could not grasp the truth. Most often they were slower intellectually, or came from homes where they watched a lot of TV and didn't engage in meaningful family conversation. Several had spent years in daycare with peers and didn't speak much more than playground survival talk. However many who came from church backgrounds had been given the impression that obedience, pleasing God, and doing religious things was our highest purpose, at least for entrance to heaven.

So then, what's the minimum for the child and the maximum for the Death Row inmate or any adult?

- a. God is holy
- b. God loves me
- c. But I have sinned
- d. Christ died in my place
- e. I have eternal life if I trust in Him
I don't have eternal life if I'm trusting in how good I am

There is a Great Joy

You've obviously noticed the title of this article is Can a Child Be Saved Before the Age of Accountability? The present question in many Christian homes is, "Can a small child be saved?" It is a wonderful question by loving parents. In our home with 9 children, it is not quite accurate that our children heard us explain the Gospel every single day of their lives until we were certain that they had put their personal faith in Jesus Christ as the one who died for their sins. But it is pretty close. Of course I shouted it through the umbilical megaphone, but even before I told them their names in the delivery room, the love of Jesus on the Cross was whispered in their ears. Then I told it to them in a voice loud enough for all the doctors and nurses present.

While they were sleeping, nursing, cooing, and gurgling, each one heard us explain salvation. I distinctly remember one of the little girls, who was not yet a believer herself, telling her little brother to "Trust in Jesus. He died for you and wants to take you to heaven. Believe in Jesus."

At first the little people just memorized the words. Father and Mother said it, so it must be true. Then there came a moment in each child's life when they realized that "Jesus died for me!" For several of the children we knew the day, time and place. For most it must have been sometime between this birthday and that birthday. No matter. One child even said, "I'm too little to trust in Jesus." But several days later, when that same child was in church where I was speaking and he heard me give an invitation to a group of adults, he whispered in his mother's ear, "I don't have to do that. I already believed it." And to my knowledge he never doubted it.

Yes, I believe the Bible teaches that a child is "safe" until he is old enough to believe: sin, God's righteousness, punishment is fair and Jesus died for me. It is a moot point if he can be saved before that split second when he can finally grasp the theology. A wee child believes the moon is made out of rocks, not green cheese, and then later he is able to grasp this truth more fully. In the same way a wee child may [*can*] also believe "Jesus came down and died on the cross for me" even before he is saved. And it is my opinion that at the elusive moment [*God's split second*] when he is capable of grasping the "for me" part, he has passed from death into life (*John 5.24*) without having been in danger of the wrath of God. Yes, theologically he was "dead in trespasses and sins" (Eph 2.1,2). I choose to believe that as Jesus said, "Let the little children come unto Me" He was telling us that it is the great propensity of every child to trust in Jesus.

I have met many, many solid Christians who attest to coming to faith in Christ at young ages, as young as 4 or 5. By a show of hands in many churches where I have spoken, hundreds of adults have told me so. It seems to me that several of our own kids were saved so young that I don't believe they had even reached the "age of accountability." They had simply believed the truths of the Word and "passed from death unto life" when they could, in the same way that Jesus said "Let the little children come unto Me."

Children are saved the same way as adults. It is not by saying a prayer. It is not by making a promise. It is not by listing all their sins. It is not by raising a hand. It is by trusting. Believing. By faith in what Jesus did. It can occur in bed. In the middle of Sunday School class. Before the "invitation." While reading the Bible. One fellow believed in Jesus while he was saying his Bible memory verses walking down the sidewalk. Another friend of mine was looking in a mirror practicing how to tell his friends about Jesus. He suddenly thought, "I've never believed this for myself!"

Friend,

If you have been depending on your good life for the assurance of heaven, you have not really been trusting in Jesus' death. The only people who are not saved are those who are depending on their works to earn eternal life.

If this is the first time you've understood and believed that Jesus died for you because you have been bad enough to deserve punishment in hell, then right now you have become a believer. A Christian. One who is trusting only in Jesus.

Congratulations! Why don't you thank Him right now for saving you? You have been assigned a mansion in heaven.