

Accountability: Children, the Mentally Handicapped, and the Rapture

Children

What happens to a young child or aborted baby when they die? Considering that over one-third of the world's population is under twenty years of age and millions of youngsters die each year and multitudes more will die during the Tribulation, this question is important to nearly everyone. Let's search God's Word for the answer:

When Israel complained in the wilderness, God declared that all those from twenty years old and above would fall in the wilderness. However, the Lord vowed to bring their children into the Promised Land with these words: "Your little ones and your children, who you say will be victims, who today have no knowledge of good and evil, they shall go in there; to them I will give it, and they shall possess it."¹ It is therefore clear that God did not hold the children under twenty years old accountable for this sin.

When King David's young child died, David said "I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me."² And, of course, David joined his son in Paradise when he died.³

In the Book of Jonah, God reasons with His reluctant prophet. "And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left...?"⁴ Here God is apparently referring to the children who were not old enough to discern between right and wrong, as well as any other persons who could not discern between good and evil.

In Isaiah God prophesied to King Ahaz: "For before the Child shall know to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land that you dread will be forsaken by both her kings."⁵ Clearly there is a point of discerning between good and evil.

In the Book of Ezekiel, the Lord rebukes Israel concerning their wickedness. One of their worst transgressions was that they killed God's children: "Moreover you took your sons and your daughters, whom you bore to Me, and these you sacrificed to them to be devoured. Were your acts of harlotry a small matter, that you have slain My children and offered them up to them by causing them to pass through the fire?"⁶ All souls are the Lord's,⁷ and here God reminds Israel that their children are really His children.

¹ Numbers 14:29-32; Deuteronomy 1:39. See also: Hebrews 11:24-25 – Moses "became of age" at 40 years old (Acts 7:23) and chose to follow the people of God rather than the pleasures of this temporary world.

² 2 Samuel 12:23

³ Psalm 23:6

⁴ Jonah 4:11. See also: Genesis 18:25

⁵ Isaiah 7:16

⁶ Ezekiel 16:20-21

⁷ Ezekiel 18:4

Jesus' words provide additional assurance: "At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, 'Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?' Then Jesus called a little child to Him, set him in the midst of them, and said, 'Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.'"⁸ A few verses later Jesus explained, "Even so it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish."⁹

Later He reiterated "Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of heaven."¹⁰

God's Word states that Jesus is the propitiation for the sins of the whole world.¹¹ Scripture also explains that "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them"¹² Jesus tasted death for everyone,¹³ and He is "The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"¹⁴ By "one Man's righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life."¹⁵

Because Jesus paid the penalty for the sins of the whole world, these and other Scriptures indicate that those who do not yet understand good and evil are covered by His blood.¹⁶

Sometimes we as fallen human beings foolishly think that we are more upright and compassionate than God. The truth is we would not even know right from wrong or be concerned unless the Lord gave us a conscience and wrote His moral law on our hearts.¹⁷ It is our Creator's love – shed abroad in our hearts – that causes us to be lovingly concerned.¹⁸

Though the Bible does not directly state that all children who die under the age of accountability go to heaven, we can be absolutely assured that the Judge of all the earth will always do right.¹⁹

"The LORD is righteous in all His ways, Gracious in all His works" (Psalm 145:17).

⁸ Matthew 18:1-4

⁹ Matthew 18:14

¹⁰ Matthew 19:14

¹¹ 1 John 2:2

¹² 2 Corinthians 5:19

¹³ Hebrews 2:9

¹⁴ John 1:29

¹⁵ Romans 5:18

¹⁶ Colossians 1:19-20; 1 Timothy 2:5-6; Hebrews 11:24; etc.

¹⁷ Romans 2:14-15

¹⁸ Romans 5:5

¹⁹ Genesis 18:25

Others who have not reached the point of accountability

Here are some additional Scriptures that indicate that those who do not yet understand are covered by Christ's atonement:

In Hosea God warns: "I will chastise them according to what their congregation has heard."²⁰ God's judgment will be based on each individual's knowledge and response.

"So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly of men and women and all who could hear with understanding on the first day of the seventh month."²¹ Ezra read God's Word before all who could understand.

Concerning those who rejected Him, Jesus said: "If I had not come and spoken to them, they would have no sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin."²² Clearly they were accountable for what they heard and understood.

"Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent."²³ Speaking to a Gentile audience, Paul explains that God overlooks ignorance, but commands all who hear to repent and trust Jesus Christ – the One who died for their sins and rose from the grave for their justification.

Jesus told the Pharisees: "If you were blind, you would have no sin; but now you say, 'We see.' Therefore your sin remains."²⁴ Apparently those who do not perceive sin – who have not reached a point of accountability – are not held accountable for sin. Sadly, the religious leaders had God's Word yet many held to their own prideful way instead of surrendering to the Lord.

"All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way; and the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all."²⁵ Notice, in order to turn to our own way and go astray assumes we were once His sheep and in His fold. Therefore, those who have not yet turned away remain in the Lord's fold and care.

"Behold, all souls are Mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is Mine; the soul who sins shall die."²⁶ God owns every soul. Before the point of accountability – before a person willingly chooses sin – they are the Lord's.

Notice Jesus first words on the cross: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do."²⁷ God's heart is to save. We can rest assured that those who do not understand will be judged fairly and with mercy.

²⁰ Hosea 7:12

²¹ Nehemiah 8:2-3

²² John 15:22

²³ Acts 17:30-31 (See also Romans 3:25)

²⁴ John 9:41

²⁵ Isaiah 53:6

²⁶ Ezekiel 18:4

²⁷ Luke 23:34

Levels of Accountability

Jesus explained, “to whom much is given, from him much will be required.”²⁸

The Bible explains that every person who can behold creation and whose conscience is active (they’ve reached a point to know good and evil), is accountable to our Creator.²⁹ Creation reveals God’s power and wisdom and shows that we are accountable to Him. And conscience shows us He is moral and we are sinners in need of a Savior. Therefore, if you are reading this with understanding then you are accountable. (Read our online article *Light To Every Man*).

The more we know (about the Scriptures, Jesus’ Divinity, His atonement and the Gospel, God’s coming judgment, Heaven and Hell, etc.), the greater our accountability to repent and trust the Lord. (Read our online *Gospel* presentation).

“You only have I known of all the families of the earth; Therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.”³⁰ Because the Jews had God’s written revelation, they were most accountable to repent and obey the Lord and His Word.

“Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin.”³¹ Repeatedly the Bible teaches that with greater understanding comes greater accountability.

“And that servant who knew his master's will, and did not prepare himself or do according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he who did not know, yet committed things deserving of stripes, shall be beaten with few.”³²

Without question, God’s eternal judgment will be fair, thorough and righteous. But because we have all sinned, we must each believe in the Lord to be saved: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.”³³

Salvation is a free gift merited by Christ’s suffering, death, and resurrection: “not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us.”³⁴

²⁸ Luke 12:48

²⁹ Romans 1 & 2

³⁰ Amos 3:2

³¹ James 4:17

³² Luke 12:47-48

³³ Ephesians 2:8-9

³⁴ Titus 3:5

You are accountable!

From these and many other verses, we can be assured God's eternal judgment will be fair. If, however, you are reading this with understanding and you think you are good enough to enter heaven apart from repentance toward God and personal faith in Jesus Christ, you are deceived. Jesus explained that we will be judged for every idle word we speak. If our only sin were gossip, or a foolish or hurtful word, or a crude comment, we would be condemned at the judgment.³⁵ Jesus explained that hatred is murder in the heart and lust is adultery in the heart.³⁶ Using your Creator's name in vain ("Oh, my God") is blasphemy and is listed even before murder in the Ten Commandments.³⁷ Therefore the only way to be forgiven and saved is to trust in Jesus who alone is sinless and who alone died for our sins and rose from the dead. (Read *The Gospel* on our website).

"For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."³⁸

"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast."³⁹

"He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him."⁴⁰

"Unless you repent you will all likewise perish."⁴¹

³⁵ Matthew 12:36

³⁶ Matthew 5:21-28

³⁷ Exodus 20

³⁸ Romans 6:23

³⁹ Ephesians 2:8-9

⁴⁰ John 3:36

⁴¹ Luke 13:3

Accountability and the Rapture

What will happen to those who have not reached the point of accountability at the Rapture? Will they be taken? God's Word assures us that all who have repented and placed their faith in Jesus will be removed to heaven at the Rapture.⁴² And not surprisingly, children and the mentally disabled tend to be the most open to the Gospel once they are able to understand it. Why? Because they're often humble and trusting and they know intuitively there is a God.⁴³ However there is no specific scriptural promise that those who have not reached accountability will be raptured.

There are several Scriptures that infer that the children of believing parents may be taken:

2 Corinthians 7:14 – “For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the (believing) wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the (believing) husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy.”

Malachi 2:15 – “But did He not make them one, having a remnant of the Spirit? And why one? He seeks godly offspring. Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously with the wife of his youth.”

Proverbs 14:26 – “In the fear of the LORD there is strong confidence, and His children will have a place of refuge.”

Deuteronomy 5:9-10 – “For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.”

This notion is substantiated when God saved not only righteous Noah but also all his household before the Flood. Likewise, God saved not just righteous Lot but also his two worldly daughters when He removed them prior to destroying Sodom and Gomorrah.

On the flip side of the dilemma, Scripture explains that each individual is accountable to God.⁴⁴ Furthermore, Jesus said that “everyone will be seasoned with fire.”⁴⁵ And Job explained, “Man who is born of woman is of few days and full of trouble.”⁴⁶ Every person – especially believers – will experience some suffering and tribulation in this life.⁴⁷ Children of godly parents are not exempted.

We must also consider that in the past when God judged a nation, He did not spare the children or handicapped from temporary suffering and death. Recall the conquest of Canaan and the Babylonian captivity.

⁴² Romans 10:13

⁴³ Romans 1 & 2

⁴⁴ Ezekiel 18:20

⁴⁵ Mark 9:49

⁴⁶ Job 14:1

⁴⁷ John 16:33; Acts 14:22; etc.

So while there is much scriptural support that indicates little children (or anyone) who dies before they reach the point of accountability will be in heaven, there is also the scriptural certainty that mankind has been appointed mortal sorrow,⁴⁸ and “God shows personal favoritism to no man.”⁴⁹

Personal conjecture concerning the Rapture

In searching the Scriptures and God’s nature, I personally believe that the Lord will take the little children and severely mentally-handicapped of a believing parent, or parents, at the Rapture. And I certainly believe that the babies in the wombs of believing mothers will be removed with their mothers. The Lord would not leave these helpless ones on earth as orphans to fend for themselves.

However, children of unbelieving parents may be left with their parents on earth. During this intense time many will come of age and choose whether or not they will follow the Lord. Those who die during the Tribulation but before reaching accountability will return to God in heaven.

While the Scriptures are not perfectly clear on this matter, we can rest on the fact that God is loving and very gracious and desires all men to be saved.⁵⁰ He is a personal God and Father and will determine on an individual basis what is fair for each of His children.

In the Book of Revelation, those in heaven who are viewing the Tribulation are repeatedly declaring “true and righteous are His judgments.”⁵¹ So we can rest knowing that all of God’s ways are righteous and good.

⁴⁸ Lamentations 3; Romans 8:20-22

⁴⁹ Galatians 2:6

⁵⁰ 1 Timothy 2:3-4

⁵¹ Revelation 16:7; 19:2