

Shayla: What is the age of accountability?

Meforshim:

Do children go to heaven when they die? Do teens? To arrive at Biblical answers to these questions, we must look at some good news and some bad news. The good news comes later in this essay. It may surprise you! However, first comes a whole bunch of bad news.

- [1 Corinthians 6:9-10 HCSB \(9\)](#) Do you not know that the unjust will not inherit God's kingdom? Do not be deceived: no sexually immoral people, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, homosexuals, (10) thieves, greedy people, drunkards, revilers, or swindlers will inherit God's kingdom.

Unrighteous people will not inherit God's kingdom. Putting it bluntly, sinners do not go to heaven. However, is a little child a sinner? And what about teens? For that matter, what about you and what about me? Are we sinners? Bad news -- the Bible says, "Yes!"

- [Romans 3:23 HCSB](#) For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

ALL people are sinners by nature, even a brand new infant who has never sinned.

Consider - a tiger shark kills for food simply because it is a tiger shark's nature to do so.

Therefore, a newly spawned tiger shark is a killer by nature even though it has not yet killed.

- [Psalms 51:5 HCSB](#) Indeed, I was guilty *when I was born*; I was sinful when my mother conceived me.
- [Psalms 58:3 HCSB](#) The wicked go astray from the womb; liars err from birth.

Similarly, the Scriptures state a newly born human is a sinner by nature even though that baby has not yet sinned. A child needs to be taught to tell the truth, whereas a child need not be taught to lie. Lying comes naturally to a sinner. A sinner isn't a sinner because he sins. A sinner sins because he is a sinner.

- [Psalms 51:4 HCSB](#) Against You--You alone--I have sinned and done this evil in Your sight. So You are right when You pass sentence; You are blameless when You judge.
- [Romans 14:12 HCSB](#) So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.
- [Hebrews 9:27 HCSB](#) And just as it is appointed for people to die once--and after this, judgment--
- [Revelation 20:12 HCSB](#) I also saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life, and the dead were judged according to their works by what was written in the books.

Does God hold each of us responsible for our sins? More bad news -- the Bible again says, "Yes!" Psalm 51.4 says that all sins are an offense against God Himself. Therefore, when we lie to someone, we have also lied to God. Moreover, the Bible clearly states that each of us must one day stand before God and be judged for our sins.

However, will God judge the sins of little kids? I'm glad you asked because now (at last!) we can begin to set the stage for some good news. There is a theory known as "the age of accountability." "Age of accountability" denotes that age at which a person becomes mature enough to be held responsible by God for his or her sins. According to this theory, someone who dies BEFORE attaining the age of accountability will go to heaven, even though he or she has not received Jesus as Savior. However, exactly what is that age?

The answer to that important question lies in the Old Covenant.

- [Exodus 30:11-16 HCSB](#) The LORD spoke to Moses: (12) "When you take a census of the Israelites to register them, each of the men must pay a ransom for himself to the LORD as they are registered. Then no plague will come on them as they are registered. (13) Everyone who is registered must pay half a shekel according to the sanctuary shekel (20 gerahs to the shekel). This half shekel is a contribution to the LORD. (14) Each man who is registered, 20 years old or more, must give this contribution to the LORD.

Notice that Adonai gave an age at which a male became a man and became responsible for his soul. That age was declared to be 20. This is not the only evidence however.

Yahweh Adonai delivered the people of Israel from the bondage of slavery in Egypt, and brought them across the wilderness to the very doors of the Promised Land. There, the children, listening to the fears of 10 of the 12 spies that had been sent into the Promised Land, refused to cross the Jordan in obedience to the Lord's command. In response He declared,

- **Numbers 14:29 HCSB** Your corpses will fall in this wilderness--all of you who were registered *in the census*, the entire number of you 20 years old or more--because you have complained about Me.

Notice that again, the ones who were held responsible for that fateful decision were all those 20 years old or more. Joshua and Caleb, the two spies who urged the people to obey Adonai and all those who were nineteen and under would be allowed to survive the coming wanderings and enter the Promised Land.

Later, the Lord further identified those who would enter the Promised Land as "children" and specifically stated that they didn't know good from evil.

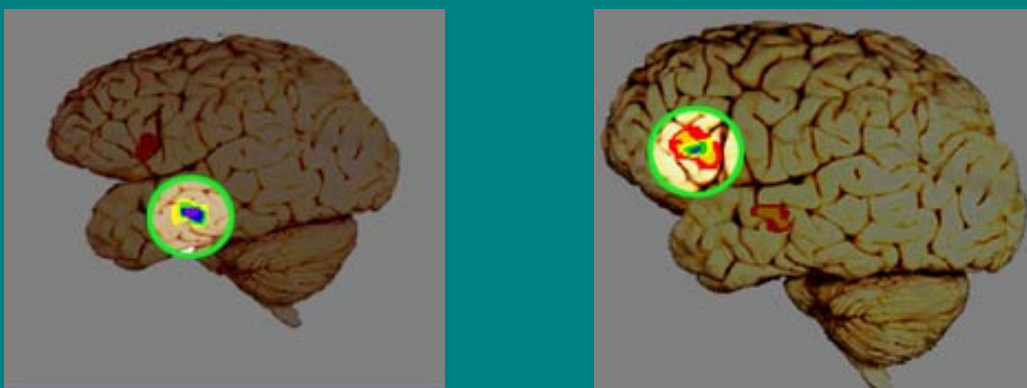
- **Deuteronomy 1:39 HCSB** Your little children who you said would be plunder, your sons who don't know good from evil, will enter there. I will give them the land, and they will take possession of it.

So, the Lord considers those who are under twenty to be children who do not know the difference between good and evil. They are thus not held accountable. They fall "under the age of accountability."

Interestingly recent research into the development of the human brain has revealed that the anterior or prefrontal part of the brain is the area where executive functions (i.e. planning, the selection and implementation of goals, the exercise of judgment and the formation of insight). The prefrontal cortex is not fully formed in the adolescent until

Deborah Yurgelun-Todd is the director of neuropsychology and cognitive neuroimaging at McLean Hospital in Belmont, Mass. She says this:

"In an adult, the anterior or prefrontal part of the brain carries out a lot of executive functions, or what we call more thinking functions: planning, goal-directed behavior, judgment, insight. And we think that the prefrontal part of the brain **influences** the more emotional or gut part of the brain. Therefore this relationship is key to understanding teenage behavior.



Teens (**left**) used less of the prefrontal (upper) region than adults (**right**) when reading emotion.

This is a picture highlighting the fact that in an adolescent brain or a younger brain, the relative activation of the prefrontal region or this anterior front part of the brain is less than it is

in the adults. However, in contrast to that, the more emotional region or that gut response region has more activation compared to the adult. So, the relationship between these two regions is very different. Furthermore, we think that that's been a very important finding in terms of understanding adolescent behavior.

She said that one of the interesting outcomes of this study suggests that perhaps decision-making in teenagers is not what we thought. That is, **they may not be as mature as we had originally thought**. Just because they're physically mature, they may not appreciate the consequences or weigh information the same way as adults do. So we may be mistaken if we think that [although] somebody looks physically mature, their brain may in fact not be mature, and not weigh in the same way. ...

Certainly the data from this study would suggest that one of the things that teenagers seem to do is to respond more strongly with gut response than they do with evaluating the consequences of what they're doing. This would result in a more impulsive, more gut-oriented response in terms of behavior, so that they would be different than adults. They would be more spontaneous, and less inhibited. ..."

According to her view and the view of other medical scientist, a teenager, 13-19 is still in the process of developing the prefrontal lobe of the brain. This part of the brain influences our emotions to do the right thing in our decision making. This is the way God made us, and explains why he holds the age of accountability at twenty years. The prefrontal part of the brain must develop before we can make correct decisions.

In view of these findings and what the word of God says it dramatically changes the way we must view our teenage children, especially in view of their ability to determine and make correct decisions for themselves. God knew that they were incapable. How many times have I heard a parent say, in regard to one of their children, "they are big enough to make up their own minds about what they choose." The sad thing is that some of these kids are only 13 or 14 years old. The trouble with this kind of thinking is that we as parents are still responsible to correct and teach these children who think that they are grown. They cannot help the fact that their prefrontal lobe in their brains is still developing.

This explains why so many teenagers are killed in car wrecks showing off to their friends, or maybe angry at a girl friend they may drive a hundred miles an hour and end up killing themselves. All of this is simply poor judgment and the in-ability to make a correct decision because their brain is not developed yet, emotions rule over good sense and judgment. Yet, we often times consider them grown up merely because of the view of others and the child's physical appearance. We simply let them make decisions that they are not fully capable of making. Question: Since God sees them as being unaccountable to make correct decisions concerning right and wrong, how can we just simply turn them loose to make their own way while they are teenagers? It certainly shifts the burden of accountability to us as parents. It also causes us to reflect on the problems of teenagers today in our own society.