

Do bad children go to Hell?

By [Randal Rauser](#) | Monday, November 26, 2018

When I first became a father, I found myself facing a question that most Christian parents must confront at one time or another: when is my child responsible to make her own decision to follow Jesus? Were thirteen-year-olds in danger of going to Hell? And what about a three-year-old? What was the point at which a child who failed to trust in Jesus could be damned for that failure? When I first held that swaddled bundle in my arms, these questions were no longer merely academic. After all, my daughter's eternal life could depend on getting the right answer!

When faced with such disturbing questions, the Christian tradition has commonly taken solace in the idea of an age of accountability. According to this notion, children are born into the world with a divine grace period which provides them time to grow and mature. During this early period, children are not held responsible for their beliefs and actions. But once they mature to a particular age, they cross a threshold into accountability after which they are responsible to make their own decision to follow Jesus ... or face damnation.

It might help to think of this idea of an age of accountability in analogy with the age of majority, that legal threshold which demarcates the move from childhood to adulthood. The transition into the age of majority is significant for a number of reasons. For example, a person is not legally responsible for a contract they sign when they are still a legal minor. But the moment they become a legal adult, they are responsible. Further, criminal responsibility varies as to whether the crime was committed when the individual was a legal minor or an adult. For these and many other reasons, the age of majority is enormously significant.

While the age of majority is clearly significant, it pales in importance when compared with the age of accountability. According to this concept, children are born heaven-bound by God's mercy, but there will soon come a day when they will become morally accountable for the lives they lead. At that point, their salvation will require a personal decision to follow Jesus.

So what does the Bible say about the ages of innocence and accountability? The answer is, surprisingly little. The most commonly cited text in favor of the age of accountability is found at the moment when King David's newborn child dies. In response, David stoically observes: "now that he is dead, why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I will go to him, but he will not return to me." (2 Samuel 12:23, NIV 1984) Here David seems to express the conviction that he will be reunited with his child again. If we think of that

reunion as occurring in heaven, then David's sentiment would suggest an age of innocence, at least for newborn infants.

However, even if we accept that interpretation, it still doesn't tell us much. After all, the passage only applies to newborn infants: the text says nothing about toddlers, small children, or teenagers. As a result, once we attempt to extend an age of innocence to a wider pool of individuals, we are moving well beyond David's prayer and into the realm of hopeful speculation. And few parents will be content to leave the salvation of their beloved children to the realm of mere speculation.

Thus, despite the fact that the age of accountability is presumably very important, there is no clear teaching in Scripture on when it occurs or even if it exists. By contrast, societies that observe an age of majority are always clear on when that point is and for good reason given that it represents the hugely important transition into a new age of adult responsibilities. Needless to say, this is very perplexing. Given the sky-high stakes with the age of accountability, wouldn't one expect that God would make it perfectly clear when a child crosses that threshold?

Here's another possibility. Could it be that the first time a child sins would constitute the moment when that child moves from innocence to accountability? At that moment, each individual could experience their own fall like Adam and Eve in the garden.

For example, when my niece was a two-year-old she asked her mother for a glass of water. The child then took the full cup, looked defiantly at her mother, and dumped the water out on the carpet. Could that have been her first sin? Perhaps, and if it was then it was appropriately dramatic!

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If we grant that that event was this child's first sin, could it also be the moment when she crossed the threshold from innocence to accountability? Perhaps. But that raises another question: would that single sin really be sufficient to warrant eternal separation from God?

Some theologians seem to think so. And to strengthen the claim they argue that any sin, no matter how seemingly trivial, is ultimately an offense against the sovereign Lord of the universe. As evidence, they note that when King David confessed his sins against Uriah, Bathsheba, and the nation, he famously observes that it is against the Lord only that he has sinned (Psalm 51:4).

As the argument goes, this shows all sin to be, at its root, an offense against God. Furthermore, any offense against God is worthy of infinite damnation. And from that, we get the conclusion that at the moment that a two-year-old obstinately pours out a cup of water on the carpet, she sins against God and thereby crosses the threshold into being an appropriate subject of eternal damnation.

Wow, now that's a heavy thought.

But the truth is that I'm not sold on that idea. The more I have reflected on this topic, the more it seems to me that it is too simple to think about this move to accountability in the manner of a single leap from innocence to guilt as if we're flipping an on/off switch. The problem is that moral agency and moral accountability appear to grow gradually over a long period. For this reason, we hold a five-year-old to a higher standard of behavior than a three-year-old. And we hold a fifteen-year-old to a higher standard than a five-year-old. And we hold adults to the highest standard of all.

In Romans 2:12-15 Paul argues that God judges individuals with respect to the light they've been given. While the immediate context is the status of Gentiles and Jews, the same principle could readily apply to the moral development of children. In other words, the greater a child's knowledge, moral awareness, and self-control, the greater their responsibility for their beliefs and actions. With that in mind, I suggest that we should move from thinking of accountability as being like an on/off switch and instead think of it as a gradual transition, perhaps more like a dimmer switch.

While that seems to me to be a significant improvement over the simplistic leap from innocence to accountability, it still doesn't answer the original question: when does a young person need to decide for Jesus? Or, as the title of the article bluntly states, do bad children go to Hell?

The truth is that we simply don't have a clear answer to this question. But let this not be a cause for despair. The fact is that we serve a God who is infinitely wiser, more loving, and more gracious than we could ever be. We may not know precisely how he will work redemption into the life of every individual. But what we do know is that in the light of eternity, all his actions will be a cause for wonder, delight, and worship. And so, while we may not know how God works to save people through innumerable shades of accountability, nonetheless we can always trust our children in the hands of our Heavenly Father.

*This article is based on a section from [my book *What's So Confusing About Grace?*](#)*

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