

## **LESSONS ON PREDESTINATION #83**

### **“Election of Dying Infants - Age of Accountability”** (Scriptures from NKJV)

Matthew 18:14 -

***Even so it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.***

**INTRODUCTION:** In the previous lesson, we looked at the general consensus of belief concerning the destiny of dead infants. We stated that it is the general consensus of mankind, along with that of Christendom, Godly individuals, and the theological systems, that all infants and the mentally retarded, who die, are elect, and thus are saved, and go to heaven upon their death. Just as repentance and faith are visible manifestations of election in adults, infants dying in a state of moral incompetence, is the visible manifestation of their election. We gave a challenge to those who hold to the “we don’t know” view, which insists on an explicit Biblical statement that all infants dying in infancy are saved. This position puts one between a rock and a hard spot. There are only two options for those who hold to the “we don’t know” view.

One, there is a possibility that some or all infants perish in hell upon their death.

Two, all infants, who die in infancy, are saved and go to heaven.

To those who refuse to decide between the two options, I remind them they have already made a decision. They have decided not to decide! We now must leave this phase of the issue for the present and move on to the next consideration. This involves the much discussed and little understood expression known as the “age of accountability.”

#### **A. THE SETTING FOR THE TERM.**

1. The setting and usage of the term is found primarily in evangelical circles, as opposed to those who hold to sacramental grace conferred through the ordinances of the church. There is much confusion and superstition surrounding the term.

a. The Pelagian view denies original sin and defines the age of accountability as occurring when the individual knowingly first chooses to sin against God. It is then they, like Adam, become sinners. Some, who would not consider themselves Pelagian, sometimes fall back into this position in their usage of the term.

b. Another mistake occurs in attempting to identify the “age” with that of a certain calendar year one has reached. I grew up in a rural country church which believed it started at the age of twelve. Why this age? This was the age when Jesus went up to the temple! Up until that age, one was said to be “safe.” After age twelve, they became a sinner and came under the condemnation of God. This can be dismissed as pure nonsense and superstition.

c. Most schools of theology, including Calvinism, teach that infants have not yet reached the age of accountability. Is this a Biblical concept? Yes, though the term is not used in the Bible, the concept is used. Note: I point out in passing that some of those who reject the view of all infants being saved because we don't have an explicit statement in Scripture, seem to have no problem using the term "age of accountability," even though there is no explicit statement found in the Bible. We will point out in future lessons that whatever is implied in Scripture bears the same authority as being stated in Scripture. The doctrine of the Trinity is an example among many.

It may come as a surprise to some who have been raised under Calvinist teaching to be told that Calvinism also holds to an "age of accountability," along with those holding to Arminian theology. What both systems agree upon is the rejection of the term as used by the Pelagian system which denies that the infant is born with a sinful nature and thus is innocent until it sins. Both evangelical Calvinism and Arminianism affirm that man inherits a sinful nature from Adam at the moment of conception. They both use the term "age of accountability," but do not attach the meaning as used by the Pelagian. However, there are some careless Calvinistic teachers who avoid using the term because it sounds too much like the meaning used by the Pelagian. They go further in their error by ascribing it to the Arminian system which is not only wrong, but unethical.

2. In order to help clear up the confusion, I wish to change the word "age," and replace it with the term "state" of accountability or responsibility. This will eliminate the idea of there being a specific age which defines the time of accountability. It is not seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, or twelve, etc.

3. Question - who then qualifies as being an infant, or child, or mentally retarded? The answer is anyone who has not yet acquired a sufficient, mature understanding which would enable them to comprehend the issues of law and grace, of sin and salvation. This would be true of those within the womb as well as others outside the womb.

## **B. ORIGINAL SIN AND ACTUAL SIN.**

1. The Bible clearly teaches that all men inherit Adam's sinful nature at the moment of conception. It also teaches a child must be able to discern good from evil before they are accountable for their actions. As we have seen, at the final judgment, men will be judged for their sinful actions. Just as Adam's sinful nature was passed on to his descendants, their sinful nature will produce sinful actions. It is for these actions they will be judged. But it is only for the actions performed after they have acquired the knowledge of good and evil that

will make them accountable before God. Up until that time, they are not held accountable by God for their actions.

2. Question - Do we have Scriptures which establish this distinction? Yes. We have already referred to several in the previous lessons. We will now re-examine these and look at the data which leads to this conclusion.

a. Deuteronomy 1:39 - ***"Moreover 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."*** This verse speaks of infants who have ***"no knowledge of good and evil."*** Their parents had rejected the message of the spies and refused to take possession of the Promised Land. Back in verse 26 we read, ***"Nevertheless you would not go up, but rebelled against the command of the Lord your God."*** Notice the sin of the parents was that of rebellion and unbelief against the Lord. The infants and children were allowed to enter the promised land because they had not rejected God's word as did their parents. They were incapable of rejecting or accepting God's word because of their lack of knowledge to discern good from evil.

b. Jonah 4:11 - ***"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—and much livestock?"*** This verse concludes God's dealings with Jonah and the City of Nineveh. He makes reference to 120,000 persons who did not yet possess the mental maturity to know the difference between their right and left hands. This clearly speaks of infants as adults would know whether they are right or left handed. The inability to distinguish between the right and left hand is a sign of mental infancy. They lack the mental capacity to differentiate between good and evil. In Scripture, the right hand stands for good and the left hand for evil. This is seen in Matthew 25:33, 34, 41 - ***"And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: . . . Then He will also say to those on the left hand, 'Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels.'"*** These little ones in Nineveh did not need to repent like their parents because they did not know what sin and repentance entailed.

c. Isaiah 7:15, 16 is even more explicit. ***"Curds and honey He shall eat, that He may know to refuse the evil and choose the good. 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."*** In speaking of the coming Messiah, we read that there will

be a time in His immaturity as a child that He will not know enough to refuse the evil and choose the good.

d. Jeremiah 19:4,5 - ***"Because they have forsaken Me and made this an alien place, because they have burned incense in it to other gods whom neither they, their fathers, nor the kings of Judah have known, and have filled this place with the blood of the innocents 5 (they have also built the high places of Baal, to burn their sons with fire for burnt offerings to Baal, which I did not command or speak, nor did it come into My mind)."*** The setting for this text is when God calls Jeremiah to be a prophet and to tell Judah, the southern kingdom, of the coming judgment which was to fall upon them. This would be known as the Babylonian captivity. The cause of the judgment was because they had forsaken God and made Jerusalem a place of idolatry. They had burned sacrifices to other gods which neither they nor their ancestors had ever known before, in that they were sacrificing their babies as offerings to the Baal god. God said that He not only did not command them to do so, but that it would never have entered His mind to do so. Now here is the expression upon which we wish to focus in the text. God said in verse four that the people have ***"filled this place with the blood of the innocents."***

Now, who are the innocents? The answer is given in verse five. They burned ***"their sons with fire for burnt offerings."*** Notice that these babies are called innocent. Even though they possess a sinful nature, they are yet in a state of innocence! They had not rebelled against God like their parents. They had no knowledge between good and evil. They may have reached the state where they knew what their parents said was right and wrong, but they had no understanding of sin and righteousness before a holy God! They were innocent and not exposed to God's judgment until they could reject the truth of God and rebel against Him.

### **C. THE TIME OF MORAL ACCOUNTABILITY.**

1. So when does the time of moral accountability begin? When does the state or condition of responsibility start? There is a transitional period when the person passes from innocence to guiltiness before God. All we can know on the basis of what is written in Scripture is that it is the time at which a person first discovers a consciousness of a difference between right and wrong as he or she becomes aware of their sinfulness before God. This does not occur at the same time for each individual. The element of knowledge seems to be the key. James 4:17 gives us this key. We read, ***"Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin."***

Dr. Curt Daniel clarifies the issue when he says,

It is an 'age of consciousness.' Infants are still in original sin but not actual sin, which requires a certain amount of knowledge, of which they are incapable. The situation would be similar to the difference between the Sins of Ignorance and the Sins of Deliberation. Infants cannot deliberate. (Curt Daniel, *The History and Theology of Calvinism*, p. 338).

Dr. A. H. Strong said that,

The child that is old enough to sin against God is old enough to trust in Christ as the Savior of sinners. (A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology*, p. 564).

2. Romans 1:18-25 provides some helpful information as to the basis upon which God will conduct His judgment upon men on the Day of Judgment.

a. We read in verse 18 - **"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness."** Here we are told that the wrath of God has been revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men. This is descriptive of God, who is not only a moral God, but requires moral conduct from His moral creatures. Then a further description stands out. These persons are said to **"suppress the truth."** A couple of questions surface. First, what truth are they suppressing? It is the truth that God is righteous and they are unrighteous! God is holy and they are sinners! They are under the wrath of God! Secondly, who is suppressing this truth, and is presently under the wrath of God? It is only those who can understand the nature of the truth. In that infants cannot discern good from evil, or righteousness and unrighteousness, they cannot suppress the truth!

b. We further are told in verses 19-25 that **"because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things. Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen."** These verses tell us that these persons are morally competent because:

(1) God had made Himself known to them in the external creation and

their internal consciences. They are without excuse.

(2) This is not true of infants. They can't suppress the truth in unrighteousness. They don't comprehend the evidence that is within them in reason and conscience. They can't see God's eternal power, neither His divine nature, nor his invisible attributes in the creation. They can't connect the things that are invisible to that which is visible. Thus they are excused from the wrath of God should they die in their state of moral incompetency. Why? Because they don't practice the things which Paul describes of those in Romans One. Then in Romans 2:2, Paul says the judgment of God will be based on what men have practiced, not upon their nature.

3. In Romans 2:1-16, Paul goes on to describe at least five principles which will be operative in the Day of God's judgment. They are:

a. Verse 2: God's judgment will be according to truth. That is, an objective standard of conduct. This excuses infants. ***"But we know that the judgment of God is according to truth against those who practice such things."***

b. Verse 5: God's judgment will be based upon the hardness and impenitent hearts of men. ***"But in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God."*** This excuses infants.

c. Verse 6: God's judgment will be based upon men's deeds or actions. ***"who will render to each one according to his deeds."*** Infants have committed no deeds.

d. Verses 11-15: God's judgment will be based on the amount of light one has been given. ***"For there is no partiality with God. For as many as have sinned without law will also perish without law, and as many as have sinned in the law will be judged by the law (for not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified; for when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them)."*** Infants cannot process the amount of light to which they have been given. Their consciences have not yet been activated toward God and sin.

e. Verse 16: God's judgment will be based upon the Gospel which searches

the secrets of men's hearts. **"In the day when God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, according to my gospel."** Infants have no secret sins of the heart for which their consciences can condemn them.

#### **D. THE TESTIMONIES OF NOTED THEOLOGIANS.**

While numerous testimonies could be compiled to support the position that no infants will be in hell, and all will be saved, I will for the time being list only two; one a Baptist, and the other a Pedobaptist. The first is:

1. Dr. A. H. Strong - Baptist. He says:

At the final judgment, personal conduct is made the test of character, but infants are incapable of personal transgression. We have reason therefore, to believe they will be among the saved, since this rule of decision will not apply to them.  
(Strong, *Systematic Theology*, p. 662).

2. John Calvin - Presbyterian. Calvin has been defaced by many as teaching that infants who die in infancy perish in hell. Yet Calvin did not believe in the damnation of infants. In his arguments against the Pelagian view of infants being born innocent, Calvin clearly affirmed they were born (conceived) with a sinful nature which they inherited, and under the wrath of God as sinners, yet the penalty is not executed upon these in this state of condition. They must commit actual known sins against their Creator before they are judged and assigned to hell in the day of judgment.

In the Amsterdam edition of his works, we read,

I do not doubt that the infants whom the Lord gathers together from this life are regenerated by a secret operation of the Holy Spirit.

The Presbyterian and Reformed Review, Oct. 1890, pp 634-651 quotes Calvin as follows:

I everywhere teach that no one can be justly condemned and perish except on account of actual sin; and to say that the countless mortals taken from life while yet infants are precipitated from their mother's arms into eternal death is a blasphemy to be universally detested.

(Quoted from Strong, *Systematic Theology*, p. 663).

I trust this will help clarify the usage of the term, "age of accountability" as used by the various schools of theology. As the famous John Owen reportedly said, "If you wish to converse with me, first define your terms!"