

Individual Responsibility

(18) Ezekiel 18:1–32

By Scott Huckaby

8/8/2021

**BIG BEND
BIBLE
FELLOWSHIP**

Ezek 18:1-4 – The answer to a false proverb.

The word of the Lord came to me again, saying, “What do you mean when you use this proverb concerning the land of Israel, saying: ‘The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge’?

“As I live,” says the Lord God, “you shall no longer use this proverb in Israel. “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.

What conventional wisdom did God address?

What do you mean when you use this proverb: God spoke to Israel regarding a **proverb** that was commonly used among the Jewish people of Ezekiel’s day.

- This was such a popular proverb in that day that it is also quoted in Jeremiah 31:29-30, and in a similar form in Lamentations 5:7.

The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge: The proverb was a protest, a complaint. The idea was that the present generation was being unjustly punished for what their **fathers** did. One would think that if **the fathers have eaten sour grapes**, then the *fathers* would have the sour taste in their teeth. According to the proverb, the fathers didn’t have the sour taste and the children did.

What was the flaw of this proverb?

The proverb inevitably led to a spirit of fatalism and irresponsibility. If the fault could really be laid at the door of a previous generation, those on whom the judgment was falling could reasonably shrug off any sense of sin and accuse God of injustice.

How is this proverb still active today?

It is based upon a one-sided philosophy of heredity. The proverb is at once an attempt to escape from responsibility for sin; and a protest against punishment.

How did this proverb reflect the idea that God was unfair?

The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge: This popular proverb both expressed and promoted a popular idea that God was unfair

in *not* punishing the fathers as they deserved, and unfair in punishing the present generation.

Where is the fairness in holding a generation responsible for the sins of their fathers?

Exodus 20:4-6 – *You shall not make for yourself a carved image—any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. 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.*

Don’t fail to see the force of the words ‘hate me’ and ‘love me.’ Thus, if they individually loved God, they could not be suffering the penalty of their fathers’ sins.

There is a cumulative disaster that mounts up when generation after generation refuses to repent.

- Ezekiel asserts that each generation is responsible for breaking the evil tradition or for maintaining the good one.

What did God think of the proverb?

You shall no longer use this proverb in Israel: God did not accept the proverb just because it was a popular message. Proverbs were a popular form of media or messaging in the ancient world, and through His prophet God commanded that this false message be exposed, answered, and spoken against.

- Just because the proverb was popular did not mean that it was true.

v4 – Why is the proverb false?

Behold, all souls are Mine: God began His answer to the false proverb by declaring an important principle. **All souls** belong to God, the souls of the fathers as well as the children. If Israel complained that previous generations escaped the consequences of their sin, God assured that He had authority over all.

- After all, He is the source and creator of all, and He sustains life with his own breath.

How will God ensure that justice is ultimately done?

The soul who sins shall die: Because God has authority over all **souls** (including **the father** and **the son**), God promised to pronounce judgment over every guilty soul. None who should be punished for their **sins** would escape that judgment.

Is the death referred to here only physical death?

No, the problem with that is there were relatively good and innocent people who physically died in the judgment that came upon Jerusalem and Judea.

- The book of Job and all our personal experience teach us that sometimes the wicked prosper in this life and the righteous suffer.

Therefore, Ezekiel must have the eternal life and death of people primarily in mind.

Ezek 18:5-9 – The promise of life to the righteous

*But if a man is just
And does what is lawful and right;
If he has not eaten on the mountains,
Nor lifted up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel,
Nor defiled his neighbor's wife,
Nor approached a woman during her impurity;
If he has not oppressed anyone,
But has restored to the debtor his pledge;
Has robbed no one by violence,
But has given his bread to the hungry
And covered the naked with clothing;
If he has not exacted usury
Nor taken any increase,
But has withdrawn his hand from iniquity
And executed true judgment between man and man;
If he has walked in My statutes
And kept My judgments faithfully—
He is just;
He shall surely live!"*
Says the Lord God.

Who is it that shall live?

But if a man is just and does what is lawful and right: In the previous line God promised that *the soul who sins shall die*. Yet, **if a man is just**, God will not condemn his soul to death. Ezekiel then began to describe the nature of the **just** man.

What are the characteristics of a just man?

If he has not eaten on the mountains: He does not eat the ritual meals that accompanied the idol sacrifices made on the high places.

Nor lifted up his eyes to the idols: He does not look to or give honor to the **idols** cherished by others in **the house of Israel**.

Nor defiled his neighbor's wife: He does not commit adultery and reserves sex for the bond of marriage.

Nor approached a woman during her impurity: He observes the laws of ritual purity described in Leviticus 15:19-31.

If he has not oppressed anyone, but has restored to the debtor his pledge: He has the heart of justice commanded by the law of Moses (as in Deuteronomy 24:12-13 and other passages).

Has robbed no one by violence, but has given his bread to the hungry: He is not a taker, but a giver to others.

If he has not exacted usury: He obeys God's commands regarding financial dealings with others, honoring God with his money.

- Such interest was allowed by the law of Moses in dealing with foreigners (Deut. 23:20), but was strictly forbidden in loans to Israelites (Exodus 22:25; Deut. 23:19; Isa. 24:2).

And executed true judgment between man and man: He is a man of justice and righteousness in his dealings with others and between others.

If he has walked in My statutes and kept My judgments faithfully: All of the preceding is a general description of the man (or woman) who is faithful to the covenant Israel made with God in the days of Moses. Today we relate with God by a new and better covenant, but we still understand the heart of God's ancient law for today.

Is this referring to mortal life or eternal life?

He is just; he shall surely live: God promised that this righteous one would ultimately **live** before Him. He would not ultimately suffer in the age to come for the sins of previous generations.

Can anyone meet these requirements for righteousness?

In theory yes but practically no. That is why everyone who God considers righteous is only righteous because they are trusting in His provision for eternal life... the Messiah paying the penalty for our sin.

- The righteous will however seek to please God and thus will be characterized by these aspects of righteousness.

How were people saved during Old Testament times?

Habakkuk 2:4 – *Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him, but the righteous shall live by his faith*

Israel had become proud or “puffed up.” As a result, they were unrighteous and facing God’s judgment. In contrast, the righteous (or the “just”) would live by faith in God and will never face God’s judgment.

In Ezekiel 18, the prophet will use three examples: a righteous man (Eze 18:5-9), his wicked son (Eze 18:10-13), and his righteous grandson (Eze 18:14-18). Three kings of Judah fit these descriptions—Hezekiah, Manasseh and Josiah.

Ezek 18:10-13 – Wicked son of the righteous father

*If he begets a son who is a robber
Or a shedder of blood,
Who does any of these things
And does none of those duties,
But has eaten on the mountains
Or defiled his neighbor’s wife;
If he has oppressed the poor and needy,
Robbed by violence,
Not restored the pledge,
Lifted his eyes to the idols,
Or committed abomination;
If he has exacted usury
Or taken increase—
Shall he then live?
He shall not live!
If he has done any of these abominations,
He shall surely die;
His blood shall be upon him.*

How is it possible that a righteous man should have an unrighteous son?

If he begets a son who is a robber or a shedder of blood: If the righteous man mentioned in Ezekiel 18:5-9 has a son who is wicked, who **does none of those duties**, then that son will bear his own guilt.

What do unrighteous men do?

But has eaten on the mountains: In each detail, Ezekiel described the wicked man as essentially the reverse image of the man described in Ezekiel 18:5-9.

What is the fate of unrighteous men?

Shall he then live? He shall not live! Though this wicked man had a righteous father, he would have to answer for his own sin. *His blood shall be upon him.* To answer the

proverb mentioned in Ezekiel 18:2, this wicked man ate his own sour grapes and it will be his teeth that are set on edge.

Why is personal responsibility so unpopular today?

It is a spiritual problem... people just don’t want to be accountable to any authority much less God.

Ezek 18:14-18 – Righteous son of the wicked father.

*“If, however, he begets a son
Who sees all the sins which his father has done,
And considers but does not do likewise;
Who has not eaten on the mountains,
Nor lifted his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel,
Nor defiled his neighbor’s wife;
Has not oppressed anyone,
Nor withheld a pledge,
Nor robbed by violence,
But has given his bread to the hungry
And covered the naked with clothing;
Who has withdrawn his hand from the poor
And not received usury or increase,
But has executed My judgments
And walked in My statutes—
He shall not die for the iniquity of his father;
He shall surely live!
“As for his father,
Because he cruelly oppressed,
Robbed his brother by violence,
And did what is not good among his people,
Behold, he shall die for his iniquity.*

What is the blessing to anyone born to an unrighteous father?

If, however, he begets a son who sees all the sins which his father has done: We are not responsible for the sins of our fathers. If the son *considers but does not do likewise*, he may live a righteous life.

Who has not eaten on the mountains: Ezekiel described the righteous man in the same covenant faithful terms as earlier in the chapter (Ezekiel 18:5-9).

- This man’s conduct is presented as the antithesis of his father’s and a virtual carbon copy of his grandfather’s.

What is the fate of a righteous son born to an unrighteous father?

He shall not die for the iniquity of the father: If the son is righteous, he will not suffer for the sins of the wicked father. To answer the proverb of Ezekiel 18:2, if the father ate the sour grapes, the son’s teeth *would not* be set on edge.

What is the fate of a wicked father with a righteous son?

But as for his father: The righteousness of the son would not justify the wicked father. Because of his many sins, *he shall die for his iniquity.*

- Again, in the terms of the proverb of Ezekiel 18:2, the wicked father ate the sour grapes, and they would set *his teeth on edge.*

How does this reveal one of the biblical flaws of Critical Race Theory?

CRT seeks to hold the descendants of slave owners accountable for the sins of their ancestors.

What other biblical flaws are there to CRT?

- CRT advocates socialism and anti-capitalism as the solutions to inequalities between people... this is clearly unbiblical because it reduces freedom and eliminates private property.
- Rather than being unifying, CRT divides people into classes of oppressors and oppressed serving to stir up increase racism instead of eradicating it. Two wrongs do not make a right though CRT advocates would have you believe it does (debased minds).

How is the emergence of CRT a sign of the end of the age?

The economy of the Tribulation will be socialist where the Antichrist will spread the wealth around...

Daniel 11:24 – he shall do what his fathers have not done, nor his forefathers: he shall disperse among them the plunder, spoil, and riches;

CRT stirs up racism (nation = ethnos in Greek) ...

Matthew 24:7 – For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places.

Quote seen of Facebook: If you are trying to provoke the monster in someone to prove that they are the monster you claim they are, you're the monster. (Kalen Dion, Poet)

Ezek 18:19-24 – Each soul bears its own guilt

“Yet you say, ‘Why should the son not bear the guilt of the father?’ Because the son has done what is lawful and right, and has kept all My statutes and observed them, he shall surely live. The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not bear the guilt of the father, nor the father bear the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself. “But if a wicked man turns from all his sins which he has committed, keeps all My statutes, and does what is lawful and right, he shall surely live; he shall not die. None of the transgressions which he has committed shall be

remembered against him; because of the righteousness which he has done, he shall live. Do I have any pleasure at all that the wicked should die?” says the Lord God, “and not that he should turn from his ways and live? “But when a righteous man turns away from his righteousness and commits iniquity, and does according to all the abominations that the wicked man does, shall he live? All the righteousness which he has done shall not be remembered; because of the unfaithfulness of which he is guilty and the sin which he has committed, because of them he shall die.

How does God change the perspective of considering the son bearing the guilt of the father?

Why should the son not bear the guilt of the father? Since father and son are linked; why shouldn't the son be guilty because of what the father did?

- God's question sounds a bit crazy to our modern individualistic ears. It is often hard for us to relate to cultures where there is a much stronger sense of family and community solidarity, where what one does affects the entire clan or community.

“We have to reflect that, however reasonable it may appear to us, habituated as we are to the sense of personal responsibility, it was a revolutionary idea to present to Ezekiel's contemporaries. They were more at home with the idea of collective righteousness and blame.” (Vawter and Hoppe)

“Communal solidarity and corporate responsibility were facts, to which experience bore witness. Ezekiel's aim is to show that they are not the only facts. God's redeemed community is a nation of righteous or repentant individuals.” (Taylor)

What are the over-riding principles that God considers?

Because the son has done what is lawful and right: God repeated the principle that He looks at people as *individuals* before Him. There are certainly some ways God may bless or judge people in community, but in regard to eternity God looks at each individual life.

The soul who sins shall die: As God judges each person individually, the righteous will be justified and the wicked will be judged. They will not be justified or condemned on the basis of family or community; *the son shall not bear the guilt of the father, nor the father bear the guilt of the son.*

The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself:

This principle is stated so clearly and repeatedly in Ezekiel 18 that there is no mistaking either its truth or importance.

Are there any exceptions to the principle that the righteous will not bear the sins of their unrighteous forebearers?

- The New Testament clearly teaches us that the guilt of Adam was passed on to the entire human race
- Also, the righteousness of Jesus Christ is passed on to all who believe upon Him (Romans 5:12-19).

These two men – absolutely unique in all humanity as representative heads of humanity – see their respective wickedness and righteousness **upon** others.

v21 – What is the good news for the unrighteous?

He shall surely live: They may choose to be righteous. The door of repentance and restoration is open to any **wicked man**.

- The thief on the cross, who because he turned, entered into paradise after a wicked life, later showed this (Luke 23:39-43).

To what can the wicked who chose to be righteous look forward?

None of the transgressions which he has committed shall be remembered against him: God promised not a probationary restoration to the wicked man who turns, but full restoration.

Why does God want the wicked to repent?

Do I have any pleasure at all that the wicked should die? In this God explained a basic principle about His nature and dealings with humanity. God takes no special **pleasure** in the death of **the wicked**. God's heart is for the wicked man to repent, to **turn from his ways and live**. God is *not* sadistic and cruel, making repentance impossible because He loves to see humanity suffer.

Since God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, why does it still happen?

God's general desire for all humanity is that they would repent, turn to Him and be saved; yet He will not spare the requirements of justice and holiness for those who refuse to **turn** to Him.

v24 – What does God think of the righteous who turn to wickedness?

But when a righteous man turns away from his righteousness: God promised no refuge for the apparently **righteous man** who **turns** to the **abominations** and idolatry of the wicked.

- Just because a person acts righteous, it doesn't mean they really are.

- Both righteous and unrighteous can act righteously but only the truly righteous will persevere.

What will be remembered of the righteous who turn to wickedness?

All the righteousness which he has done shall not be remembered: A man or woman known for a righteous life can have it “forgotten” before God *and* man by a turn to wickedness.

What erroneous doctrine comes from idea that once you just profess to be a follower of Christ that you are eternally secure?

Profession without repentance is of no eternal value.

No person-believer or unbeliever-ever has the right to say, ‘Because I was righteous once, it does not matter whether I am plunging into sin now.’

- True believers do not have a license to sin.

Ezek 18:25-32 – The fairness of God's ways

“Yet you say, ‘The way of the Lord is not fair.’ Hear now, O house of Israel, is it not My way which is fair, and your ways which are not fair? When a righteous man turns away from his righteousness, commits iniquity, and dies in it, it is because of the iniquity which he has done that he dies. Again, when a wicked man turns away from the wickedness which he committed, and does what is lawful and right, he preserves himself alive. Because he considers and turns away from all the transgressions which he committed, he shall surely live; he shall not die. Yet the house of Israel says, ‘The way of the Lord is not fair.’ O house of Israel, is it not My ways which are fair, and your ways which are not fair? “Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways,” says the Lord God. “Repent, and turn from all your transgressions, so that iniquity will not be your ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions which you have committed, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit. For why should you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies,” says the Lord God. “Therefore turn and live!”

Is it fair of God to condemn a righteous man who becomes wicked?

Is it not My way which is fair, and your ways which are not fair? Israel was **not fair** for hoping to find either guilt or innocence in other generations. Each soul would stand on its own before God.

- While Israel claimed to be victims of an immutable universal law that locks their fate to the conduct of their parents, they really perceive themselves to be at the mercy of a capricious God, whose actions are unpredictable and arbitrary.

Yet the house of Israel says: Because the error was so deeply ingrained, so God's counter to their error had to be strong and repetitive.

v30 – How would God judge Israel?

Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways: The error in believing in communal or family salvation or damnation is so serious and dangerous that God unmistakably emphasized the individual's responsibility before God.

But what about those who learned ways because their only example was a wicked father?

It may be true that I have inherited tendencies to some forms of evil from my father; but in the essential relation to God there are forces available to me mightier than all these tendencies. Neither righteousness nor evil is hereditary.

What is the good news in these godly principles?

Repent, and turn from all your transgressions, so that iniquity will not be your ruin: Because of the principle of individual responsibility before God, it is absolutely essential for each soul to **repent** and thus prevent their **iniquity** from becoming their **ruin**.

- People may not bank on a treasury of past good deeds to ensure their future well-being, nor need they despair of a treasury of evil that prevents them from enjoying life.

And get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit: In this, Ezekiel pointed all his listeners and readers to look forward to the new covenant (Deuteronomy 30:1-6, Jeremiah 23:1-8, Jeremiah 31:31-34, Jeremiah 32:37-41, Ezekiel 11:16-20, Ezekiel 36:16-28, Ezekiel 37:11-14, 37:21-28).

- This would make the life transformation so desired by those who **repent** actually possible.

Why did God repeat His desire that no one die in their iniquity?

For I have no pleasure in the death of the one who dies: Once again in this section, God emphasized this principle (first stated in Ezekiel 18:23). God considered it important that all understand that God is *not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance* (2 Peter 3:9).

What is the logic behind the question, why should you die?

Why should you go to *hell* while the kingdom of God is open to receive you? Why should you be the *devil's slaves*, when you may be *Christ's freemen*!

What does God implore all people?

Therefore turn and live! God ended this prophecy with a strong, dramatic exhortation and application. God's people should **turn** and **live**.

- No one should not have fatalistic confidence or despair in their forefathers or descendants.
- God has offered a way for mankind to come to Him, and they must come as individuals.

What applications for the here and now are in this chapter?

- God holds everyone responsible for their own sin
- The blame-game does not hold water with God.
- Neither righteousness nor wickedness are inherited beyond remedy.
- God has provided a provision for eternal life... repent and embrace God's free offer for life!