

Ezekiel 18: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Ezekiel chapter 18. The word of the Lord came to me. What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel? The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge. As I live, declares the Lord God, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel.

Behold, all souls are mine. The soul of the father, as well as the soul of the son, is mine. The soul whose sins shall die. If a man is righteous and does what is just and right, if he does not eat upon the mountains, or lift up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, does not defile his neighbour's wife, or approach a woman in her time of menstrual impurity, does not oppress anyone, but restores to the debtor his pledge, commits no robbery, gives his bread to the hungry, and covers the naked with a garment, does not lend at interest or take any profit, withholds his hand from injustice, executes true justice between man and man, walks in my statutes, and keeps my rules by acting faithfully. He is righteous, he shall surely live, declares the Lord God. If he fathers a son who is violent, a shedder of blood, who does any of these things, though he himself did none of these things, who even eats upon the mountains, defiles his neighbour's wife, oppresses the poor and needy, commits robbery, does not restore the pledge, lifts up his eyes to the idols, commits abomination, lends at interest, and takes profit, shall he then live? He shall not live.

He has done all these abominations. He shall surely die. His blood shall be upon himself. Now suppose this man fathers a son, who sees all the sins that his father has done. He sees and does not do likewise. He does not eat upon the mountains, or lift up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, does not defile his neighbour's wife, does not oppress anyone, exacts no pledge, commits no robbery, but gives his bread to the hungry, and covers the naked with a garment, withholds his hand from iniquity, takes no interest or profit, obeys my rules, and walks in my statutes. He shall not die for his father's iniquity. He shall surely live. As for his father, because he practised extortion, robbed his brother, and did what is not good among his people, behold, he shall die for his iniquity.

Yet you say, Why should not the son suffer for the iniquity of the father? When the son has done what is just and right, and has been careful to observe all my statutes, he shall surely live. The soul whose sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity 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 person turns away from all his sins that he has committed, and keeps all my statutes and does what is just and right, he shall surely live. He shall not die. None of the transgressions that he has committed shall be remembered against him, for the righteousness that he has done, he shall live. Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord God, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live? But when a righteous person turns away from his righteousness, and does injustice, and does the same abominations that the wicked person does, shall he live? None of the righteous deeds that he has done shall be remembered, for the treachery of which he is guilty, and the sin he has committed, for them he shall die.

Yet you say, The way of the Lord is not just. Hear now, O house of Israel, is my way not just? Is it not your ways that are not just? When a righteous person turns away from his righteousness, and does injustice, he shall die for it. For the injustice that he has done, he shall die. Again, when a wicked person turns away from the wickedness he has committed, and does what is just and right, he shall save his life? Because he considered and turned away from all the transgressions that he had committed, he shall surely live, he shall not die. Yet the house of Israel says, The way of the Lord is not just.

[4 : 12] O house of Israel, are my ways not just? Is it not your ways that are not just? Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways, declares the Lord God. Repent and turn from all your transgressions, lest iniquity be your ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed, and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, O house of Israel?

For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord God. So turn and live. Ezekiel chapter 18 is an important chapter in which Ezekiel challenges a popular saying.

After challenging this saying, he faces two responses. The great saying is, The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge. And the two responses are found in verses 19 and 25. Why should not the son suffer for the iniquity of the father?

And the way of the Lord is not just. The context here seems strange. As Daniel Block notes, the surrounding chapters are about the Davidic dynasty. Why interrupt this context with a chapter about the judgment of fathers and sons. Walter Brueggemann observes that the characters of this chapter are three men in generational succession, a father, his son, and his son's son.

The father is a righteous man, the son is a wicked man, and the son's son is a potentially righteous man, who has the chance to learn from his father's cautionary example. Brueggemann writes, In each case, the destiny for and verdict upon each generation depends on adherence to Torah in terms of a. avoiding idolatry and serving only Yahweh, b. obedient sexuality, and c. obedient economics.

[6 : 01] It is likely that three generations are not a theoretical case, but refer in turn to a. Jehoiakim the good king, 2nd kings chapter 23 verse 25, b. Jehoiakim the bad king, 2nd kings chapter 23 verses 36 to 37, and c. Jehoiakim the third king, 2nd kings chapter 24 verses 8 to 12.

That is, the verdict is still out on the third king who is in exile, the leader of the exilic community, the king upon whom the Ezekiel tradition has based its chronology, Ezekiel chapter 1 verse 2.

Thus, it is probable that this text in Ezekiel chapter 18 concerns the destiny of and theological verdict upon the third generation, the generation of exiles led by Jehoiakim. The good news announced in this text is that the third generation may indeed repent and be obedient in three key areas of a. Yahweh's sovereignty, b. sexuality, and c. economics. The assurance of the text is that the exilic generation need not be enthralled by the sins of the previous generation of Jehoiakim, but is free to start again in repentance and new obedience. This approach helps us to make a lot more sense of what the passage is doing in its context. It also helps us to consider the theological import of the passage. Behind the passage is Deuteronomy chapter 24 verse 16. Fathers shall not be put to death because of their children, nor shall children be put to death because of their fathers. Each one shall be put to death for his own sin. This verse is alluded to in verse 20 of Ezekiel chapter 18.

As Marsha Greenberg observes, its elements are alluded to in reverse order. As Bloch notes, many biblical scholars in the 20th century saw Ezekiel's point in this chapter as a theological innovation, progressing the understanding of the people beyond the sort of corporate or collective judgment that we see in places like Exodus chapter 20 verses 5 to 6.

I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers and the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments. An example of a statement of transgenerational judgment can be seen in Lamentations chapter 5 verse 7. Our fathers sinned and are no more, and we bear their iniquities.

[8 : 27] The simplistic opposition of the notions of collective and individual divine judgment underlie claims that Ezekiel is making an innovation here. In reality, the scriptural doctrine of judgment, both human and divine, was always a very sophisticated and subtle one, with pronounced collective and individual dimensions, which come into play in different ways in different situations. For instance, the Davidic covenant set up a situation where the actions of the king had profound ramifications for the entire nation, for good or for ill. The individual determined the fate of the collective.

Under the Davidic covenant, the consequences of the sins of one evil king could hang like the sword of Damocles over future generations. We see this in 2 Kings chapter 24 verses 3 to 4, for instance, during the reign of Jehoiakim. Surely this came upon Judah at the command of the Lord, to remove them out of his sight, for the sins of Manasseh, according to all that he had done, and also for the innocent blood that he had shed. For he filled Jerusalem with innocent blood, and the Lord would not pardon.

Even many years after Manasseh died, the judgment for his sins still hang over the people. This is important to bear in mind when reading this chapter. If Brueggemann's argument is correct, the figures in view here are Davidic kings primarily, Davidic kings in succession. In Ezekiel chapter 14, Noah, Daniel, and Job were given as examples of righteous men who could save others through their faithfulness and intercession in their respective situations. But the disaster coming upon Jerusalem would be one in which they would only escape with their own lives. Such things as the proximity of the divine presence, the rights given to human agents of judgment, the build-up of sins over many generations.

For instance, in Genesis chapter 15, the Lord speaks of the sins of the Amorites not yet being complete, the intervention of intercessors, and the presence of the righteous. All of these are important in determining the ways that individual or collective judgment functions in such situations. It's important that we don't abstract passages like this from their contexts, regarding them as if they were timeless theological treatises, rather than timely words to a people in a specific situation. It seems best to me to regard this chapter as a word of challenge and encouragement to a people struggling with the sense of doom and fatalism, and likely with it, a failure to take responsibility for their own behaviour. The sins of their fathers hang over their heads in exile, and the much-repeated proverb expresses their sense of hopelessness. They are suffering for the crimes of their fathers and have no way to change things. The message of Ezekiel, however, is that such fatalism is unjustified. He's not teaching a purely individual principle of judgment. It's very clear they are in exile because of the accumulated sins of Judah and Israel over many generations. Previous generations may have been more wicked than they are, but the collective sins of the nation over many generations have built to a proportion that led to them being taken away. Their presence in Babylon is not a result just of their personal, individual sins.

Nevertheless, the exile community, unlike Jerusalem, has the possibility of a future before it. The great storm clouds of judgment for the accumulated sins of the nation, which were delayed in the reign of Josiah, for instance, but not dissipated, would not hang over the nation forever. Jeremiah also tackled the same proverb during his ministry in Jeremiah chapter 31 verses 29 to 30, speaking of the context of the restoration of the people and a new covenant order. In those days they shall no longer say, the fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge. But everyone shall die for his own iniquity. Each man who eats sour grapes, his teeth shall be set on edge.

[12 : 22] The point of Jeremiah's statement is not that the Lord has changed his rules of judgment. Rather, it is that the period during which the Lord watched over his people to pluck up, break down, overthrow, destroy, and bring harm, has come to an end, and a period of collective blessing is about to begin.

The nature of judgment changes when it is a few unrighteous persons being removed from a blessed righteous group, rather than a few peculiarly righteous persons being delivered from a cursed unrighteous collective group. In both cases, the actions of the righteous matter and have consequences for their personal fates, but their respective fates play out against the backdrop of a collective situation, which also impacts upon the fates of individual righteous persons. In a situation of collective judgment, for instance, they may escape with their lives, but lose everything else.

Much of what Ezekiel seems to be challenging in this chapter is the determinism and fatalism with which the notion of this judgment is understood. By repeating the proverb, the people are instilling a mindset of doom in themselves. They are rejecting the possibility of exercising agency that might change their situation, have a sense of the impossibility of repentance, and they also seem, by implication, to have a notion of God as being implacably hostile towards his people. While Jeremiah in his prophecy said that the proverb would no longer be used in the future, here in Ezekiel chapter 18, in verses 3 and 4, the Lord sternly rebukes them for using this proverb. He explicitly commands them not to use it anymore.

He refutes the claim of the proverb by stressing that people's lives and destinies are in his hands, not in the hands of capricious fate or a deterministic logic of judgment, denying them all possibility of meaningful agency. The son's soul is not merely at the mercy of his father's actions, but it belongs to God.

The point is developed with the threefold witness in the verses that follow, in verses 5 to 18. There are three generations of men. There is the righteous father. He is described as doing all the things that are expected of a righteous man according to the commandments of Leviticus, for instance. Perhaps particularly focusing upon the tasks of kings, we might also see, as Joseph Blenkinsop notes, an oath of clearance such as we see in Job chapter 31 in the background here.

[14 : 44] The man's righteousness is expressed in his not having committed a series of particular sins. With the potential background in Leviticus, we might also see here some of the sins for which the Canaanites were cast out of the land. The son of this father, however, does not walk in his father's footsteps. He's a violent man, he's a shedder of blood, he's given to idolatry, he's an oppressor, and he commits abomination and usury. Such a man, who is likely referring to Jehoiakim in the context, is not going to live his father's righteousness notwithstanding. His destiny is to be cut off.

This is probably not just a matter of him dying young. We might also think about the way that the legacy of such a person would be cut off, and we might also think of the post-mortem judgment that he would face at the Lord's hands himself. The key figure in the series, however, is not this middle figure, or even the first figure, it's the third and final one. This is the man who stands at the present moment of time, the one who could make a change. This man, who reflects upon his father's actions and their consequences, need not have his fate determined by what his father has done.

If he eschews the injustice of his father, and acts in the righteous way of his grandfather, he will surely live. His father will die, but he will be preserved. Generational cycles are real, and judgment and consequences for sin can even be accumulated and passed down over time.

But repentance and change is possible. A new generation can break the patterns and the cycles set by their fathers. The determinism and the hopelessness of the exiles of the house of Israel needed to be rejected. They could move forward. They could hold out hope for the future, if only they would take responsibility for their own situation and repent and turn to the Lord.

The question of verse 19, why should not the son suffer for the iniquity of the father, is a surprising one. It may not seem clear why this is at issue. Greenberg following Calvin makes the helpful point that what is probably at issue here is not the principle so much as the fact.

[16:47] Surely they are the innocent sons suffering for the iniquities of their fathers. The Lord, however, rejects this. The son may be spared when he does what is just and right, but they have not done that. They can't merely blame their fathers for their current situation, as if their fathers were the ones who were responsible and they perfectly innocent.

The verses that follow present a great appeal to the exiles of the house of Israel. There is a possibility not just to break generational cycles, but to break individual cycles. The wicked person who repents will be received by the Lord. He will surely live. He will not die. Like Moses in the book of Deuteronomy, Ezekiel is placing the alternatives of life and death before the people, beseeching them to choose the way of life and not give themselves to death. Even in the dark grave of exile, there remains a way back to the Lord. And the Lord is willing and desirous to accept all who will repent. Verse 23 is a powerful reminder of the heart of the Lord. Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord God, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live? The Lord's ultimate purpose is not to trip people up, to trap them, or prevent them from knowing life. He wants them to come to, or to return to him, to know life in its fullness. The Lord through Ezekiel is systematically demolishing many of the reasons that people would have to prevent them from returning to the Lord. First, he dismantles the idea that they are doomed by the sins of their fathers to judgment, and can never escape from under that cloud. Second, the idea that they are doomed by their own sins is removed. Even the wicked man who repents will be received by the Lord. Third, the idea that

God is ungraciously disposed towards them is also removed. The Lord is not standing in the way, preventing them from turning back. It is rather his desire that they would repent and live. What excuse remains?

On the other side, there is a warning. The righteous person who turns away from his righteousness will not have his righteous deeds remembered. The present is the time of judgment. It's about how you stand in relationship to God here and now, not about what you did in the past, either good or evil.

To a people insisting that the ways of the Lord are not just, that they are suffering for other people's sins, the Lord is clear. It is rather their ways that are not just. Every individual will be judged by the Lord, and they are called to repent and turn from their transgressions, each one of them.

[19:17] They are not doomed to destruction, and so they should not continue in iniquity that would bring such destruction upon them. What is needed is radical heart change to remove from them all of the transgressions that they committed, the transgressions by which they followed in the ways of their fathers, and by which they ended up in exile in the first place. The promise of the covenant was after all the curses came upon them, once they found themselves in exile far away, if their hearts were changed and they started to seek the Lord, they could be restored. The Lord would establish them once again. There is hope held out for the house of Israel. They may be in the grave of exile, but the question is presented to them. Why will you die, O house of Israel? Their fate is not inevitable. God is on the side of their good. He wants them to live. He does not delight in their death, and the prophetic message of the chapter ends with the firm instruction, so turn and live.

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