

Ezekiel 18 presents one of the most foundational issues of scripture which is the reality that no one can blame anyone else for the punishment carried out on their own sin. God is just and while He takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, He is holy and by His standards each person is judged. While national punishment is being foretold for Israel, it is based on individual sin. The sinful nature is prone to play the blame game and resists admitting guilt. This principle was illustrated immediately after Adam sinned and blamed Eve for his actions.

THE JUSTICE OF GOD AND INDIVIDUAL SIN

18:1-2 *“Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying, “What do you mean by using this proverb concerning the land of Israel, saying, ‘The fathers eat the sour grapes, But the children’s teeth are set on edge?’”*

This was a proverb that the Israelites had developed, (not that God had given), to express an attitude of grievance against punishment that they faced. They may have developed the proverb from what the Lord had said in Exodus 20:5 that He is “a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation...”. Moses made it clear that children were not punished for their parents sin (Dt 24:16). The point is that sin does have an impact on subsequent generations. Even in the time of Jesus the disciples still retained this reasoning as a belief when they asked if the man born blind was blind by his own sin or the sin of his parents (Jhn 9:1-3).

This false proverb teaches two very important points. First that scripture taken out of context often leads to bad theology and second that no one can blame anyone else for their own sin and just recompense. Both believers and non believers will face the consequences of sin in this life, but those who die unrepentant in unbelief will be eternally judged.

18:3-4 *“As I live,” declares the Lord GOD, “you are surely not going to use this proverb in Israel anymore. Behold, all souls are Mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is Mine. The soul who sins will die.”*

The ultimate end of this proverb will be made during the time of Jacobs trouble which the Lord will use to bring the nation of Israel to it’s knees in repentance, acknowledging their guilt before the Lord in the rejection of Jesus (see Hos 5:15). In Jeremiah 31 just prior to announcing the new covenant the Lord again declares that they will not utter this proverb any longer (Jer 31: 29,30). Again this will be because the Lord will bring them to humility to realize that they are individually guilty and they will stop playing the blame game in order to see themselves as justified while in sin.

In verses 5-18 the Lord brings into focus two scenarios in order to clarify personal guilt. We will first see a righteous father of an unrighteous son and then we will see an unrighteous father of a righteous son. In both cases righteousness should be viewed as the actions of a redeemed individual and not a righteousness that is achieved by self effort.

18:5-13 *“But if a man is righteous and practices justice and righteousness, and does not eat at the mountain shrines or lift up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, or defile his neighbor’s wife or approach a woman during her menstrual period— if a man does not oppress anyone, but restores to the debtor his pledge, does not commit robbery, but gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with clothing, if he does not lend money on interest or take increase, if he keeps his hand from iniquity and executes true justice between man and man, if he walks in My statutes and My ordinances so as to deal faithfully—he is righteous and will surely live,” declares the Lord GOD. Then he may have a violent son who sheds blood and who does any of these things to a brother (though he himself did not do any of these things), that is, he even eats at the mountain shrines, and defiles his neighbor’s wife, oppresses the poor and needy, commits robbery, does not restore a pledge, but lifts up his eyes to the idols and commits abomination, he lends money on interest and takes increase; will he live? He will not live! He has committed all these abominations, he will surely be put to death; his blood will be on his own head.”*

The “live / die” aspect of both cases pertains to both temporal and eternal outcomes. The man in the above scenario is practicing righteousness from a heart of faith; a genuine desire to love God and neighbor. On the basis of the Mosaic law, individuals as well as Israel, the nation, were generally blessed with physical life while the law of God was observed. If the law was violated, especially habitually, the consequences could include physical death. Even children are told that obedience to parents is not only right in the sight of God, but leads to long life (Ex 20:12).

But appearances are not always what they seem and there will always be the perplexing reality that sometimes the wicked seem to flourish while “good” people may not always. But all men are appointed to physical death and then will face judgement (Heb 9:27). Ultimately those who practice lawlessness expose the reality of their eternal status and will not inherit eternal life (1Cor 6:9; Gal 5:21). One’s eternal fate is an individual determination. This is why we cannot pray someone out of a supposed purgatory. A good father cannot accumulate righteousness for his son. Each one is to follow the admonishment of Philippians 2:12-13.

18:14-18 *“Now behold, he has a son who has observed all his father’s sins which he committed, and observing does not do likewise. He does not eat at the mountain shrines or lift up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, or defile his neighbor’s wife, or oppress anyone, or retain a pledge, or commit robbery, but he gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with clothing, he keeps his hand from the poor, does not take interest or increase, but executes My ordinances, and walks in My statutes; he will not die for his father’s iniquity, he will surely live. As for his father, because he practiced extortion, robbed his brother and did what was not good among his people, behold, he will die for his iniquity.”*

In presenting the reverse scenario, the idea of fatalism is defeated and hope is presented. The son was not hidden from his father’s iniquity as he “observed” what his father did. The father’s sinful lifestyle was so pervasive that it was in plain sight for the son to see. But this son was motivated by love for God and his fellow man. Genuine faith is the obvious reality and the Lord will not punish him for the actions of his father. Individual accountability is then further repeated in the next couple of verses.

18:19-20 *“Yet you say, ‘Why should the son not bear the punishment for the father’s iniquity?’ When the son has practiced justice and righteousness and has observed all My statutes and done them, he shall surely live. The person who sins will die. The son will not bear the punishment for the father’s iniquity, nor will the father bear the punishment for the son’s iniquity; the righteousness of the righteous will be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked will be upon himself.”*

The repeated principle is that fatalism and blame shifting is man’s way, not the Lord’s. Another couple of scenarios are presented that express repentance vs. apostasy.

18:21-23 *“But if the wicked man turns from all his sins which he has committed and observes all My statutes and practices justice and righteousness, he shall surely live; he shall not die. All his transgressions which he has committed will not be remembered against him; because of his righteousness which he has practiced, he will live. Do I have any pleasure in the death of the wicked,” declares the Lord GOD, “rather than that he should turn from his ways and live?”*

God clearly is patient and does not delight in the destruction of the wicked in either temporal or eternal realms. The Lord is merciful, patient and sovereign in bringing sinners to repentance. There is no one who is “too much” a sinner that the Lord cannot make new. We are given the great promise that anyone who turns to the Lord in repentance and faith has their sinful estate wiped clean. This also applies to temporal life. One who may be on the path of physical destruction because of a pattern of sinful behavior, can see life healed and extended as a result of turning to the Lord and forsaking sin.

18:24-26 *“But when a righteous man turns away from his righteousness, commits iniquity and does according to all the abominations that a wicked man does, will he live? All his righteous deeds which he has done will not be remembered for his treachery which he has committed and his sin which he has committed; for them he will die. Yet you say, ‘The way of the Lord is not right.’ Hear now, O house of Israel! Is My way not right? Is it not your ways that are not right? When a righteous man turns away from his righteousness, commits iniquity and dies because of it, for his iniquity which he has committed he will die.”*

This reverse scenario is portraying apostasy. This man may have appeared to be righteous for quite some time yet ultimately his heart is dead, not truly desiring the things of God. As in the case of what John says in 1John 2:19 that “they went out from us, but they were not really of us”, this individual may even fool the people of God for a long time, but the true fruit will eventually come forth.

18:27-29 *“Again, when a wicked man turns away from his wickedness which he has committed and practices justice and righteousness, he will save his life. Because he considered and turned away from all his transgressions which he had committed, he shall surely live; he shall not die. But the house of Israel says, ‘The way of the Lord is not right.’ Are My ways not right, O house of Israel? Is it not your ways that are not right?”*

The summary of these scenarios is again focused on the heart attitude of the unrepentant. Even though the Lord makes it clear that each one will be judged for his own life so that no one can cast blame or be judged for the sin of another, those who play the blame game have called God unjust and have not considered that it is they who are indeed unjust. The scenarios present a seemingly simple proposition; all anyone has to do to find favor with God is to repent and walk in a manner that is in keeping with that repentance which is to walk by faith. But the Word makes it clear that no one seeks after the Lord and has a righteousness of their own (Rom 3:10-18). So what may seem so easy is actually impossible unless the Lord intervenes, yet He is justified in carrying out judgement.

18:30-31 *“Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, each according to his conduct,” declares the Lord GOD. “Repent and turn away from all your transgressions, so that iniquity may not become a stumbling block to you. Cast away from you all your transgressions which you have committed and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! For why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies,” declares the Lord GOD. “Therefore, repent and live.””*

The solution is a new heart and new spirit which man cannot generate on his own. This speaks to the reality of salvation by grace. God exercises His mercy by bringing forth the solution based on the New Covenant. What man cannot bring about in himself, God brings about in the miracle of the new birth (Jer 31:34; Jhn 3:5-8). If Israel had repented of their sin, they would not have faced the slaughter that was about to come. What was worse is that the majority would die in unrepentance and unbelief.

While it is a mystery and a paradox, God exercises mercy according to His plans. The story of Israel is the story of each sinner. The command of God is for sinners to repent and yet repentance comes from God (Acts 11:18). Israel is destined to see the kingdom of God and exist in a state of perfection while the eternal King reigns from Jerusalem on David’s throne, but it was never intended to be established by their own effort. Jesus told Israel that if they were willing to accept Him, the kingdom would be a reality for them at that point (see Matthew 11). But in the plan of God it was necessary that Israel rejected Jesus and had Him crucified in order for the New Covenant to be ratified with His blood.

Paul makes it clear in Romans that Israel’s unbelief was also necessary in order that the gospel could go forth to the nations, yet the day remains when the nation of Israel will be brought to repentance and salvation. But whatever God is doing to bring about His plans does not negate man’s accountability for his own sin.

How does Israel’s proverb relate to modern psychology today in regards to individual sin?

How has it impacted the way that Jesus is presented by a large portion of Christendom today?

What should believers’ attitude be toward sinfulness? The unrepentant?