

LifeWay Explore the Bible Series for June 26: A relationship with God isn't inherited_61305

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A relationship with God isn't inherited

- Ezekiel 18

By Dennis Tucker

Truett Seminary, Waco

Throughout much of the book of Ezekiel, the prophet challenges several key theological tenets of Israel. Chapter 18 represents another critical challenge. In this instance, the prophet levies a challenge against the notion of "transgenerational retribution."

Transgenerational retribution is the idea that God's punishment of sinners spans generations. Such a sentiment is embodied in Exodus 20:5: "For I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents to the third and fourth generation of those that reject me."



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Such a view of sin and retribution apparently had led to the proverb mentioned in verse 2: “The fathers eat sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.” Ezekiel, like Jeremiah (Jeremiah 31), sought to challenge this proverb, especially in light of Israel’s experience in exile. Apparently during exile, the notion of transgenerational retribution in general, and this proverb in particular, had led to two ideas that were considered theologically untenable by Ezekiel.

The first problem was that of divine injustice. Apparently those who were in exile felt as though they were being punished for the actions of others—and the writer of 2 Kings says as much when he indicates it was the sin of Manasseh that led to the exile of Judah (see 2 Kings 21:10-15). As a result, the people began to complain that God’s ways were “unfair.” They believed that the proverb was true—that their teeth were set on edge because their fathers had eaten sour grapes—and it was this perception that had led them to cry out that God had been unjust in his treatment of the present generation.

There also was a second problem stemming from this proverb. A certain sense of fatalism had apparently paralyzed this exiled community. If they were being punished for the sins of a previous generation, then it really did not matter how they acted in the present. In their eyes, the future already had been determined by the actions of those who had preceded them.

Because of these perceptions, Ezekiel set out to challenge this tradition and

to reorient their thinking in radically new ways. Whereas the proverb mentioned in verse 2 led to fatalism and misguided thinking, the call for individual responsibility actually is a proclamation of good news and hope. Those in exile assumed their present circumstances were the result of their parents' disobedience, and by extension, they assumed their future was destined equally to such misfortune due to the actions of the previous generation.

The call to individual responsibility, however, dismissed such notions and suggested their future rested in their own hands.

The Lord states in verse 4, "The soul (or 'the person') who sins is the one who will die." And then in verse 5, a condition is given: "Suppose there is a righteous man who does what is just and right." And then a litany of behaviors is provided, all corresponding to the demands of the law. If one does what is just and right, then the Lord will declare, "that man is righteous, he will surely live" (v 9). The outward actions of the individual manifest the inward state of her or his heart—thus while these verses do not suggest salvation is by works, they do affirm that a manifestation of true belief in God is our outward actions grounded in obedience to God's design for human life.

Throughout chapter 18, the idea of being alive or living is affirmed. The verb "to live" appears 10 times in this chapter alone (and the noun form occurs three times). Thus, the intent of this chapter is to recast a vision of life for God's people. The booming judgment of God heard in earlier chapters must be held in check with God's commitment to the ongoing life of his people. The challenge to transgenerational retribution not only provides hope for the exiled community; it also suggests their future may be recast in terms of life and not death if they choose to be God's people.

The last three verses of chapter 18 provide a key summary for the contents of the entire chapter. The people are called to repent—to turn away from

their transgressions. In so doing, they will obtain a “new heart” and a “new spirit.” But such a transformation is predicated in part on the willingness of the people to “turn back” and repent.

God asks in verse 31, “Why will you die, O Israel?” The rhetorical question implies there is no need for such a wasted death—they cannot be punished for the disobedience of their fathers, only for the futility of their own actions. And for that reason, God announces, “I take no pleasure in the death of anyone. ... Repent and live” (verse 32). The call for individual responsibility should prove to be a positive force in motivating God’s people toward obedience—the God who demands obedience is the same God who desires life.

Discussion questions

- Is the notion of “transgenerational retribution” still invoked today? How does its use change or alter our own notions of individual responsibility?
- What motivates you toward obedience? Does the thinking of Ezekiel correspond with your own motivations? Why or why not?

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