

Israel's False Proverb

Ezekiel 18

Ezekiel 18:1-4: *"The word of the Lord came to me again, saying, ²"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'? ³"As I live," says the Lord God, "you shall no longer use this proverb in Israel. ⁴"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."*

Background Notes

While Ezekiel was ministering the word of the Lord to the captives in Babylon, a popular proverb was circulating among the Jewish people in Babylon: *"The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge."* And Jeremiah said that this proverb was making the rounds in Jerusalem as well (31:29-30).

What did this proverb mean? Who was to blame for these sad conditions? As far as the people of Judah were concerned, *they* were not to blame. They felt that the former generation was to blame - and that's what they meant by the proverb of the sour grapes. They would not admit that they were to blame.

Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel refuted and repudiated this proverb. Jeremiah's word from the Lord was that Jerusalem and Judah were so far gone that they had passed the point of no return. It was just a matter of time before it was all over. Even though the Temple was in Jerusalem, the Lord was not going to save the city or the Temple from destruction.

Doctrinal Points

1. Individuals are held accountable for their own sins.

God's answer to the proverb is in verse 4: *"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."* In other words, every individual soul is held responsible and accountable for his or her own actions before God. No one can place the blame for sin on the former generation.

In verses 5-18, three different cases were presented to illustrate this principle. The first case is of a righteous man who does right.

Ezekiel 18:5-9: *"But if a man is just and does what is lawful and right; ⁶If 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;*

⁷ 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; ⁸ 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; ⁹ If he has walked in My statutes and kept My judgments faithfully— He is just. He shall surely live!” says the Lord God.”

All the items mentioned in verses 5-9 were part of the Mosaic Law. “*Eating on the mountains*” was a reference to participating in idolatrous feasts in the pagan “high places.” “Usury” is interest charged on a loan. The Jews were not to collect interest from their own people. So if a person followed the Law of God, and refused to do the things that the Law condemned, this righteous individual would live.

The second case is of a wicked son of a righteous father.

Ezekiel 18:10-13: “If he begets a son who is a robber or a shedder of blood, who does any of these things ¹¹ and does none of those duties, but has eaten on the mountains or defiled his neighbor’s wife; ¹² if he has oppressed the poor and needy, robbed by violence, not restored the pledge, lifted his eyes to the idols, or committed abomination; ¹³ 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.”

The wicked son would die for his sin and the righteousness of his father *would not* - and *could not* - help him.

The third case is of a righteous son of a wicked father.

Ezekiel 18:14-19 - “If, however, he begets a son who sees all the sins which his father has done, and considers but does not do likewise; ¹⁵ 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; ¹⁶ 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; ¹⁷ 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! ¹⁸ “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. ¹⁹ “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.

In this case, the father died for his iniquity, and the son lived because of his righteousness.

The summary of the cases is in verse 20: *“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.”*

The point that “individuals are held accountable for their own sins” is hard to miss. It certainly refutes and condemns people today who try to blame everyone but themselves for their wrongdoing. Individuals are held accountable for their own sins.

2. The Lord does not take pleasure in the death of the wicked.

Ezekiel 18:21-32: *“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. ²² None of the transgressions which he has committed shall be remembered against him; because of the righteousness which he has done, he shall live.²³ 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?”*

²⁴ *“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.*

²⁵ *“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? ²⁶ 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. ²⁷ Again, when a wicked man turns away from the wickedness which he committed, and does what is lawful and right, he preserves himself alive. ²⁸ Because he considers and turns away from all the transgressions which he committed, he shall surely live; he shall not die.*

²⁹ *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? ³⁰ “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. ³¹ 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? ³² For I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies,”* says the Lord God. *“Therefore turn and live!”*

Throughout this chapter, the terms “life” and “death” refer to *physical life* and *physical death* – they do **not** refer to *eternal life* and *eternal damnation*. Ezekiel 18 does **not** teach that a person can gain salvation by doing good works. Living a good and morally upright life will **not** result in eternal life for anyone. And if you are saved and have *eternal life*, you can't lose it. No, *death* and *life* here in Ezekiel 18 refer to *physical death* and *physical life*.

Remember the context. The Jewish people had turned away from the Lord. They were facing *physical death* at the hands of the Babylonians because of their sin and continual breaking of God's covenant. God was using the Babylonians as His rod or axe of discipline. The people could not blame God's judgment on the sins of former generations or on the nation in general. They all had sinned as individuals, and they would die as individuals. They could not say that the ways of the Lord were not right (v25&29). This was the moral law. The ways of the Lord are always right. The people were wrong.

However, there was a way of escape. What was it? **Change your ways!** God said He does not take pleasure in the death of the wicked, but desires that everyone should live (v23-32). Whether the people of Judah were in Jerusalem that would soon be conquered, or in Babylon as captives, the key to saving their lives as individuals was to turn from wickedness, change their ways, and have a new heart and spirit (v31). Repent and live!

But if they would not repent and change their ways, they would die as individuals because of their iniquities - regardless of their good deeds in the past (v24&26). Notice that verse 30 emphasizes that a judgment of **individuals** is in view: *“Repent, and turn from all your transgressions, so that iniquity will not be your ruin.”*

All this, of course, has an application for today. Eternal life or eternal damnation is an individual matter. God takes no pleasure in the eternal damnation of the unbeliever – in fact, *“God is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance”* (2 Peter 3:9). And *“God desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and man, the Man Christ Jesus”* (1 Timothy 2:4-5). There is escape from eternal damnation for any individual through personal faith in Jesus Christ as Savior. The Lord does not take pleasure in the death of the wicked.

Practical Application

Throw the scale out!

A lot of us would like to throw the scale out after we check our weight! However, for this application we're thinking of the “balance” type of scale. Many people have the idea that when our lives are over, God puts all our good works in one side of the balance, and all the bad works go into the other side. He then determines our eternal destiny based on which way the scale tips. Nothing could be further from the truth. Throw the scale out!

Ezekiel 18 and many other biblical passages clearly show that the scale idea is **not** a good illustration of how God operates - with the question of physical life or physical death for the Jewish people in Ezekiel's day, or with the question of eternal life or eternal damnation individuals today. Throw the scale idea out!

Your destiny is not determined by the amount of your good works versus the amount of your bad works. Your eternal destiny is determined by your relationship with God when your life ends and the time for judgment comes. So be sure to trust in Jesus Christ as your personal Savior now, and thus receive eternal life.