

## EZEKIEL 18

## PUNISHED FOR OTHER PEOPLE'S SINS?

The prophet now passes to an expostulation with the Lord's people on account of their sin, and he earnestly pleads with them to follow the ways of righteousness. He wished them to understand that no matter how gracious the intentions of God might be, the people could not expect any benefit from them if they were still wedded to the love and practice of sin.

This chapter follows the format of a controversial pleading. This is because the people are portrayed in a self-righteous condition – inclined to shift the blame of their bad situation off of themselves, and to lay it partly upon their forefathers and partly upon God Himself. But ample grounds exist in the Scriptural history to show us that there was no thorough and general renunciation of iniquity among these people. The partial improvements that had been made were chiefly of a superficial nature; and they seem to have had no other effect than to foster a self-righteous spirit, which induced them to look elsewhere than in themselves to find the cause of their troubles and calamities. Therefore, in this word of severe expostulation and rebuke, the prophet exposes the vanity of their imaginations; and he declares them to be still at war with the principles of God's righteous administration.

This chapter begins with an announcement of the general principle of God's righteousness, as a principle of fair and impartial dealing with each individual according to his actions; and then the prophet explains and illustrates the operation of this principle, in a series of hypothetical cases. Jehovah's righteousness is both fair and impartial: "The soul that sinneth, it shall die!" (verse 4) That soul alone shall die, for it has incurred the law's penalty for its sin; while others, who have lived righteously, shall be entitled to the blessings of eternal life. But here, of course, a question naturally arises: has this always been the principle of God's dealing? Or does this announcement by the prophet mark a change in the Divine administration?

There can be no doubt that the law of God, given on Mount Sinai, did sanction the principle of a certain visitation of the sins of the fathers upon the third and fourth generation of their descendants. But neither the prophets nor our Lord Jesus seem to have had the least thought of any contradiction existing between the principle which thus connected the child with the parent in visitations of evil, and the principle of the direct responsibility of each person for the actions of his own life. Nor is the ground of reconciliation between these two seemingly opposite thoughts hard to find. The principle of a descending curse to families on account of sin proceeds upon the assumption of a descending guilt;

Outline of the chapter:

- ❖ The principle of God's righteous and impartial dealings – verses 1-4
- ❖ Four hypothetical examples to illustrate that principle – verses 5-28
- ❖ Encouragement to God's people to repent and return to Him – verses 29-32

the punishment is spoken of as being transferred from father to son, because the iniquity itself had also passed from the one to the other. If successive generations unite themselves together into a brotherhood of evildoers, God must also unite them in a bond of chastisement; and He must proportion His visitations of wrath according to the degree of perverseness and obstinacy shown in the course of iniquity. But at the same time, He takes into account the personal responsibility and behavior of each person. It is when the son consents to his father's iniquity, and deliberately chooses it as his own inheritance, that the Lord punishes them both together. Thus Ezekiel made it clear that these people would not be permitted any longer to throw upon others the blame that was properly their own. The soul that sins must die! This severe impartiality of God stands as a wall of security and defense for the good, but it becomes like a consuming fire to the wicked; and if death is not yet their portion, it can only be because the Lord is still patiently waiting for their repentance!

Having repudiated the false imaginations of the people concerning the innocent suffering for the guilty, and having asserted anew the great principle of God's impartiality in dealing with each person according to his deservings, the prophet emphasized that so far from laying to men's charge the burden of iniquities that had been committed by others – the Lord would not even visit them for their own, if they sincerely repented and turned to the way of righteousness! And on the other hand, if they began to fall away into transgression, they must not expect their goodness earlier in their lives to screen them from judgment. "Have I any pleasure at all, that the wicked should die?" asked the Lord God. Indeed not! He would much rather see him turn from his ways and live! What a beautiful simplicity and directness is in that statement! The Lord herein sets before the people, once more, the way of life and the way of death; and He calls upon them to determine which of the two they were inclined to choose. What a moving tenderness is in this appeal: "Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked?" It is as if He was saying, "You think of Me as if I were a heartless being – indifferent to the calamities that befall My children, and even delighting to inflict chastisement upon them for sins which they have not committed. But so far from this, I have no pleasure in the destruction of those who – by their own transgressions – have justly deserved it. I would rather that they turn from their ways and live!" Thus He presents Himself as a God of holy love – saddened and grieved over the lost condition of His wayward children, and earnestly desiring their return to peace and safety; yet still acting in strict accordance with the principles of righteousness.

*Lord, work in our own hearts and cause us to confess our sins, and not cast the blame upon others, so that we may repent and find full forgiveness in You! Amen.*

