

Ezekiel 18 “The Soul Who Sins Shall Die”
Psalm 15
Titus 2

September 26, 2010

Children,

Have you ever said, “It’s not my fault!”?

“I couldn’t help it!”?

“He made me do it!”?

“It’s not fair!”?

Maybe your parents don’t let you say those things –
but do you still think them?

“Well, it’s *not* my fault! My brother kicked me – and I just pushed back –
he *made* me do it! I couldn’t help it!
And it’s not fair that you’re blaming me.
I didn’t deserve this...”

“If he hadn’t said that, then I wouldn’t have gotten upset...”

It’s not my fault.

“If she hadn’t worn that dress, then I wouldn’t have looked...”

I couldn’t help it.

“If you only knew all the facts, you wouldn’t blame me...”

It’s not fair.

Ezekiel cuts through all our excuses and says it very simply:
The soul who sins shall die.

Yes, your father may have been the grossest idolater in the country.
Your mother may have been a whore.

But God is not going to judge you for what *others* have done.
He will judge you based on what *you* have done!
If you have done righteousness, you will live.
If you have done wickedness, you will die.

Sing Psalm 15
Read Titus 2

Suppose a righteous man has a wicked son.

Suppose Josiah (the best king in Judah’s history, according to 2 Kings)
has a son like Jehoiakim

(who “did what was evil in the sight of the LORD,
according to all that his fathers had done” – 2 Kings 23:32).

And suppose Jehoiakim has a son.

If Jehoiachin, the son of Jehoiakim, does what is right,
then he will live.

But of course, the problem is that Jehoiachin
has started down the same path as Jehoiakim.
So is it now too late?

Hence, verse 21 says, “but if a wicked person turns away from all his sins...
he shall surely live.”

If Jehoiachin has learned his lesson –
if he repents and turns from his sin –
then he shall live.

There is still hope for the house of David.

Introduction: “It’s Not My Fault!” (v1-4)

18:1 The word of the Lord came to me: 2 “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’?

We should note that the “you” in verse 2 is plural.

It is not *Ezekiel* who is repeating this proverb,
but the exiles.

We know from Jeremiah 31:29-30 that this proverb was circulating in Jerusalem as well.

The idea of “transgenerational accountability” was common in the ancient world.

Children often paid for their parents’ sins.

And you see the idea in the second commandment, where God forbade idolatry,
“for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God,
visiting the iniquities of the fathers upon the children
to the third and fourth generation of them that hate me,
but showing love to thousands of them that love me
and keep my commandments.”

Indeed, the exile itself is said in 2 Kings 24:3-4 to have come
because of the sins of Manasseh (Josiah’s grandfather) –
especially idolatry and shedding innocent blood.

For this reason, the people of Jerusalem (whether in Jerusalem or in Babylon)
were repeating this proverb.

We are in exile because of Manasseh’s sins.

It’s not *our* fault.

And there is nothing we can do about it.

Notice that at *this* point, there is no discussion of “divine fairness.”

“The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.”

Neither here nor in Jeremiah 31 is there a complaint about fairness.

This is the way the world is – we can’t help it.

The question here is *not* the question of fairness,
but the question of fatalism:
 What is the point of obeying God?
 Our fathers have sinned, and we are doomed!
The proverb contains a sort of cosmic fatalism –
 if everything runs according to the rules of cause and effect,
 then we are doomed to death forever!

But Ezekiel disagrees.

 The sins of the fathers do not determine the fate of the children!

You cannot blame anyone else for your situation.

 You cannot blame your parents.

 You cannot blame your spouse.

 You cannot blame God.

 You must take responsibility for yourself before God.

3 As I live, declares the Lord God, this proverb shall no more be used by you 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.

Please understand how important this is.

 Ezekiel 18:4 is saying that the universe is not governed by impersonal laws.

 You are not just a dizzy fly spinning through a mechanistic universe!

 “All souls are mine.”

 (All “persons” are mine)

 Every person who has ever lived belongs to God.

 We live in a personal universe,

 where every person lives in relationship to the Triune God.

There is nothing new about Ezekiel’s statement.

 If you look back to Deuteronomy 24:16, you see the same principle.

 “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.”

And indeed, it goes even further back,

 all the way to Genesis 9 – with its insistence that man is created in the image of God

 and therefore whoever (or whatever) kills man is guilty of striking at God’s image

 (there is a nobility – a uniqueness – to man that has not been effaced by sin).

Israel was called to live as God’s image – God’s firstborn son.

 And Ezekiel says that every person stands in a direct personal relationship to him.

 Your relationship to God is not mediated by your parents (or your children).

 Before God you stand *alone*.

And Ezekiel reminds his hearers of what Moses had said in Deuteronomy 30:
if you love the LORD your God and live according to his word,
then you live.
If you rebel and worship other gods,
then you die.

And he does this by giving a case study of three generations.
The form of verses 5-20 follows the Levitical “case law” approach.
“If a man” does thus-and-so,
this shall be done to him.

1. A Case Study of Justice in Three Generations (v5-20)

a. The Righteous Man Does What Is Just and Right...He Shall Live (v5-9)

5 “If a man is righteous and does what is just and right— 6 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 neighbor's wife or approach a woman in her time of menstrual impurity, 7 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, 8 does not lend at interest or take any profit, withholds his hand from injustice, executes true justice between man and man, 9 walks in my statutes, and keeps my rules by acting faithfully—he is righteous; he shall surely live, declares the Lord God.

We should start by noting that the list of “what is just and right”
is virtually identical in the three lists.

But who is this describing?

If you think in terms of Psalm 15, you can see how this is describing the righteous king
(and you can hear this as a description of the righteous Josiah),
but it is also saying what every faithful Israelite should be.

The exiles were drawn from the “upper crust” of society.

They would have recognized in this list, the description of what the King was to be.
But they would also have recognized that this is what *they* were supposed to be.

After all, Israel’s king is supposed to be the ideal man –
the one who succeeds where Israel failed,
the one who succeeds where Adam had failed.

There are six pairs of statements that define “righteousness” here.

Righteousness is defined in terms of piety, chastity and charity.

The first pair focuses on worship – or “piety”:

he does not eat on the mountains (probably a reference to high places)
or lift up his eyes to “gillulim” (the dung-gods) of Israel.

Righteousness is first defined in terms of right worship.

If you are an idolater, then you are not righteous.

If you put your hope in something or someone other than the LORD,
then you are not righteous.

The second pair then turns to sexuality – or “chastity”:
adultery with your neighbor’s wife,
or sexual intercourse with a menstruating woman.

Leviticus 18 had forbidden sexual intercourse during menstruation.
A woman was considered “unclean” during her menstruation,
and so her husband should not “approach her” then.
But if you are sexually impure, if you are unchaste,
then you are not righteous.

Verse seven begins with another “if” clause,
“if he does not oppress anyone” (and the following two pairs explicate this).

The concern here is that the righteous man does not exploit the weak.

The third and fourth pairs focus on economic justice – or “charity”:
he restores to the debtor his pledge –
when the debt is paid, you restore the animal or object
that was given in pledge;
he does not commit robbery –
perhaps the most blatant form of theft;
he gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with a garment –
Ezekiel understands that “you shall not steal”
also requires us to *give* to the poor;

PLEASE understand this:

You may not be passive in relation to the poor.
It is not enough to “avoid” oppressing the poor.
If you are not giving your bread to the hungry,
you cannot be righteous.

He does not lend at interest or take any profit –
the two words here reflect the two aspects of taking interest:
1) when you charge interest, you are “biting off” someone else’s property,
2) when you charge interest, you are “increasing” your own property.
God warns that you *may not* increase your own property
by biting off the property of the poor.

You could summarize all this as in the fifth pair:

He “withholds his hand from injustice,
executes true justice between man and man” (v8),
or, to return to the divine context where we started,
he “walks in my statutes, and keeps my rules by acting faithfully”

In short, “he is righteous.”

I want you to see three things here:

- 1) righteousness cannot be divorced from piety –
if you are not rightly related to God, then you are not righteous;
- 2) righteousness cannot be divorced from chastity –
if you are engaged in ungodly sexual behavior, then you are not righteous;
- 3) righteousness cannot be divorced from charity –
if you are oppressing *or ignoring* the poor, then you are not righteous.

But if you love and worship God
and if you love your neighbor,
then you are righteous –
and you shall live, declares the Lord GOD.

What does it mean, “he shall surely live”?

We all know (and Ezekiel surely knew!)
that sometimes the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer.
How can Ezekiel – living in exile in Babylon! –
say that the righteous will “surely live”?

We are not talking about every single individual case here.
We are talking about God’s standards of righteous judgment.
The charge has been levied that God condemns the sons for the sins of the fathers.
And God is saying, “No, in my court room, the righteous man shall live.”

This is a statement of the principles of divine justice –
not a statement of what happens to every individual in the middle of history.

But then he turns to the second generation:

b. The Wicked Son Does Abominations...He Shall Die (v10-13)

*10 “If he fathers a son who is violent, a shedder of blood, who does any of these things
11 (though he himself did none of these things), who even eats upon the mountains, defiles his
neighbor’s wife, 12 oppresses the poor and needy, commits robbery, does not restore the pledge,
lifts up his eyes to the idols, commits abomination, 13 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.*

Again Ezekiel starts with worship/piety.

This person has no regard for the worship of God,
neither does he have any regard for the image of God in man.

This person has no regard for human life.

If others get in the way of his own advancement,
he oppresses them, robs them, even kills them.

He is an idolater, a murderer, an adulterer, a thief, and a usurer.

He is the antithesis of his father.

He is not righteous.

He does abominations – like the whore of Ezekiel 16.
He is impious, he is unchaste, he is uncharitable.

Therefore he shall surely die (the form suggests that he shall be put to death),
and his blood shall be upon himself – not upon his fathers!

This is a good description of Josiah's son, Jehoiakim.
It's true that any Israelite who acts like this deserves to die.
For that matter, *any human being* who acts like this deserves to die.
If you worship other gods, you deserve to die.
If you defile your neighbor's wife, you deserve to die.
If you profit at the expense of the poor, you deserve to die.

But if the Son of David is like this?
Israel's king was supposed to succeed where Israel failed.
But if Israel's king acts like the rest of us,
what hope do we have?

But what about the third generation?
Are we doomed forever?

c. The Righteous Grandson Obeys My Rules...He Shall Not Die (v14-18)

14 "Now suppose this man fathers a son who sees all the sins that his father has done; he sees, and does not do likewise: 15 he does not eat upon the mountains or lift up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, does not defile his neighbor's wife, 16 does not oppress anyone, exacts no pledge, commits no robbery, but gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with a garment, 17 withholds his hand from iniquity, [3] 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. 18 As for his father, because he practiced extortion, robbed his brother, and did what is not good among his people, behold, he shall die for his iniquity.

What if the wicked son himself has a son who turns away from his father's wickedness?
He sees, he looks, and he turns away – he repents of his father's deeds –
and he acts like his righteous grandfather.

He worships God (he is pious).
He is sexually pure (he is chaste).
He cares for the poor and does justly in his economic dealings (he is charitable).

What will happen to him?
"he shall surely live."

He will not die for his father's iniquity.

But immediately, Israel wants to know, why not!

Israel's question is a *very* different question from the questions of the modern day.

Today, we would applaud Ezekiel for his emphasis on personal responsibility!
But the Israelites do not!

2. Why Should Not the Son Suffer for His Father? A Lesson in Covenantal Justice (v19-24)

19 “Yet you say, ‘Why should not the son suffer for the iniquity of the father?’

This is the normal pattern of the universe!

Children suffer for their parents’ sins all the time!

If your parents are chain smokers – you are likely to get some sort of lung disease!

Certainly our actions have consequences for others!

Your parents’ foolishness seriously affected you.

But their foolishness does not determine what you do!

The fact that someone else sinned against you does not mean that you get to sin!

God will not condemn you for what your parents did!

He will condemn you because you responded sinfully to your parents’ sin!

You can see, perhaps, behind the question,

that Israel does not like the trajectory of Ezekiel’s proverb.

If we suffer only because of our own iniquity,

then that would imply that *we* are sinners –
that we *deserve* the exile!

And that is precisely where Ezekiel is going:

When the son has done what is just and right, and has been careful to observe all my statutes, he shall surely live. 20 The soul who 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.

Ezekiel’s concern is to show that the exile has come about
because of *your* complicity in your fathers’ sins.

If you are in exile, it is because you have *sinned* like your fathers.

But if we have brought death upon ourselves for our sins –

if we have brought the exile upon ourselves because of our wickedness,
then what is the point?

The wages of sin is death.

Therefore we are all going to die.

Why bother?

But God says that the “righteous” and the “wicked” are not fixed categories.

The wicked may become righteous,
and the righteous may become wicked:

21 "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. 22 None of the transgressions that he has committed shall be remembered against him; for the righteousness that he has done he shall live. 23 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? 24 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.

In short, if a wicked man repents of his wickedness and does what is right,
he will live.
And if a righteous man repents of his righteousness and does what is wicked,
he will die.

Just because you have been wicked in the past does not mean that you have to stay wicked.
Just because you have been righteous in the past does not mean that you have to stay righteous.
(Remember Paul's "let him who thinks that he stands, take heed lest he fall"!)

Just as past generations cannot "store up" righteousness or wickedness for their children,
so also, individuals cannot "store up" righteousness or wickedness for themselves.

So the first point is:
God does not judge you according to your parents.
But the second point is:
God does not judge you according to your past.

He judges you according to your present.
What are you now?
Are you righteous or are you wicked?
The moment of judgment is today.

But, some would say,
this is arbitrary!
How can God ignore past generations?
How can God ignore *your past actions*?!
(read)

3. God Is Just: Therefore, Repent and Live! (v25-31)

25 "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? 26 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. 27 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. 28 Because he considered and turned away from all

the transgressions that he had committed, he shall surely live; he shall not die. 29 Yet the house of Israel says, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' O house of Israel, are my ways not just? Is it not your ways that are not just?

The word translated “just” here is a word meaning “to measure or determine.”
Only Ezekiel uses it in this form,
and in context it plainly has the sense of arbitrariness.

Is God being arbitrary?
Israel thinks that they are victims of a unpredictable and arbitrary God
who has designed the universe against them.

Ezekiel replies by insisting that *Israel* is the one who is unpredictable and arbitrary.
God has made it clear how to live:
turn away from wickedness!
walk in the ways of the LORD and do what is just and right!

And so God declares to Israel that he will judge according to their ways.

30 “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.

Ezekiel insists that Israel is guilty before God.
It is not because of what your fathers did.
It is because of what *you* have done that you are under God’s judgment!

But even as Ezekiel calls Israel to repentance,
he calls them to do the impossible:

31 Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed, and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit!

In Ezekiel 11:17-20, at the beginning of this section of Ezekiel’s prophecy,
Ezekiel had said:
‘Thus says the Lord God: I will gather you from the peoples
and assemble you out of the countries where you have been scattered,
and I will give you the land of Israel.’
18 And when they come there,
they will remove from it all its detestable things and all its abominations.
19 *And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them.*
I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh,
20 that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them.
And they shall be my people, and I will be their God.

Now Ezekiel says, “make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit!”
There is a certain irony here.

As Ezekiel will make clear in chapter 20,
Israel has never before succeeded at making themselves a new heart!

But it all sounds so simple:
“just obey!”

Why will you die, O house of Israel? 32 For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord God; so turn, and live.”

All this is true.
God does not take pleasure in the death of anyone!
God wishes for all to repent and live.

But the problem is that Israel’s history demonstrates what happens if God waits for us to repent.
If God waits for humanity to make a new heart and a new spirit for himself,
then we’re in trouble!

It is true that God has no pleasure in the death of anyone –
but the only way for God to give us life
was for God himself to take our death upon himself.
The wages of sin *is* death,
and so God must put the wicked to death.
And on the cross “instead of putting me to death,
or even me and my children for my sins,
he put to death rather his own Son, his own beloved Son,
who had no sin of his own.” (Duguid, 243).

Pay careful attention to v32.
“I have no pleasure in the death of anyone.”

This word “have pleasure” is same word used in Isaiah 53:10
“Yet it *pleased* the LORD to bruise him”

Many translations go the route of saying (in Isaiah)
“it was the *will* of the LORD to bruise him” –
but that is not the force of this word.
hafets means “to delight” or “to take pleasure.”

One may choose to do all sorts of unpleasant things.
I may choose to change a dirty diaper,
but I would not generally say, “I delight” in changing dirty diapers.

God says “I do not delight in the death of anyone.”
Yet “it delighted the LORD to bruise” his own Son.

Why was God “pleased” to bruise his Servant?

As Isaiah 53 goes on to say,

it was because it was only through the death of the Anointed Servant
that life could come to his people.

We, like Israel, were trapped in the second generation of Ezekiel 18.

This is Paul’s point in Romans 2-3.

God calls all men to repent – but no one repents.

If God takes no pleasure in the death of anyone,

then he *must* take pleasure in the death of his Son –

because it is only through the death of his Son

that the cycle of sin, rebellion, futility and despair is broken.

God was pleased to bruise his Son –

God delighted in *his* death –

precisely because he does not delight in the death of anyone.

Because of Jesus,

“We are not mechanically determined beings,

locked into the consequences of our own or anybody’s else’s past.” (Wright, 197)

You are not forever locked into a cycle of sin, rebellion, futility and despair!

God calls you to repent!

He calls you to do the impossible:

make yourself a new heart!

And when you acknowledge that impossibility,

that you cannot save yourself,

then you must humble yourself and repent and believe in Jesus.

Because in Jesus, God has done what we could not do!

For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son

that whosoever believes in him, should not perish

but have everlasting life.

Will you stop blaming others for your situation?

Will you take responsibility for your own sins?

If you say, “I have not sinned,”

you are a liar – and the truth is not in you.

But if you confess your sins, then God is faithful *and just* to forgive your sins,

and to cleanse you from all unrighteousness.

And with your sins forgiven – cleansed from all unrighteousness –

you are not only *declared righteous* in your justification,

but you are also set free from the dominion of sin.

If you are in Christ, then sin is no longer your master.

And because King Jesus is Lord,

you may now live a life of piety, chastity and charity

before God and before man.

Let us pray:

Grant, Almighty God, since you have not only created us out of nothing, but since you have created us again in your only-begotten Son, and since you have raised us from the depths, up to the hope of your heavenly kingdom, grant that we may not be proud or puffed up with vanity, but may we embrace this favor with humility, and submit ourselves to you.

And as you have taught us how we ought to live before you, grant that we might live pious, chaste, and charitable lives toward you and one another, until we become at length partakers of that glory which your only-begotten Son has acquired for us. For we pray in his glorious name. Amen. [based on Calvin]