

EZEKIEL 18:19-32

Ezekiel was carried into Babylonian captivity as a part of the second of three groups in 597 B.C. He received his prophetic call about five years later, 592 B.C. and was Jehovah's voice to the Hebrew captives for about 20 - 22 years.

The message of our text was shortly before the fall of Jerusalem. The immediate occasion for the passage was the use of the proverb, "*The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge*" (18:2). "That this was a common proverb in ancient Israel around this time is evidenced by Jeremiah's reference to it (Jer. 31:29), though he used it in a slightly different context from Ezekiel".¹

By use of this proverb the people were trying to both escape personal responsibility for the calamity that had befallen Israel, and to justify their failure to do the works of repentance that the prophet of God required of them. Stalker observed that they used the proverb either to exonerate themselves from blame for the impending calamity or to plead impotence to avert it, since according to the proverb its cause lay in the unalterable past. The proverb gave them both an alibi and an excuse for moral inertia.²

The passage divides itself into two major sections. The first, verses 19-24, declares the personal responsibility of the individual in his relationship with God, and thus his own responsibility for what happens to him. The second section, verses 25-32, considers the question, "Is God equal" or "just" in His dealings with man. Good and bad alike had suffered from national disaster, and worse was to come; if God were just He would not permit such indiscriminate hardship.

Ezekiel 18:19-24

Yet say ye, Wherefore doth not the son bear the iniquity of the father? When the son hath done that which is lawful and right, and hath kept all my statutes, and hath done them, he shall surely live. The soul that sinneth, it shall die: the son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son; the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him. But if the wicked turn from all his sins that he hath committed, and is lawful and right, he shall surely live, he shall not die. None of his transgressions that he hath committed shall be remembered against him: in his

¹John B. Taylor, Ezekiel, An Introduction and Commentary. (London: Thy Tyndale Press, 1969), p. 147.

²D.M.G. Stalker, Ezekiel, Introduction and Commentary. (London: SCM Press, 1968), p. 163.

righteousness that he hath done he shall live. Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked? Saith the Lord Jehovah; and not rather that he should return from his way, and live? But when the righteous turneth away from his righteousness, and committeth iniquity, and doeth according to all the abominations that the wicked man doeth, shall he live? None of his righteous deeds that he hath done shall be remembered: in his trespass that he hath trespassed, and in his sin that he hath sinned, in them shall he die.

Ezekiel directly attacks the belief that one generation is punished for the sins of another. The expression used is not merely bear the iniquity, but bear (part) in the iniquity.³

In declaring man's individual responsibility, Ezekiel 18:19-24 presents at least three problems. The first is that it is an apparent contradiction of much of the rest of the Book. Chapters 6, 7, and 8 tell of national punishment for the wicked, and is a theme that re-occurs in Ezekiel. "It had been the basis of much of Ezekiel's own teaching, namely that the suffering of the exiles could be traced back to the persistent rebellion, idolatry and unfaithfulness to the covenant of previous generations of Israelites."⁴

The second problem is that it oversimplifies human experience, and the third is how to reconcile it with the Decalogue; "visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, upon the third and upon the fourth generation of them that hate me." (Exodus 20:5).

Stalker tries to solve these problems by giving the passage an eschatological setting. "Ezekiel, like Jeremiah is referring to the coming Kingdom and coming Day of Judgment....when he affirms that a son will not bear the iniquity of his father, he is not denying the Second Commandment and the facts of heredity and national and family solidarity."⁵

To view it only in the Christian or New Testament sense of final judgment is to lift it out of context and to leave the Jews of Ezekiel's day to wonder what he meant.

Ezekiel reinforces his assertion about individual responsibility in vv. 21ff by pointing out the possibility of changing ones life. The wicked can repent and do righteousness and live, or the righteous can turn back to a life of sin and die.

What is the "life" and "death" of which Ezekiel speaks? "Life in this biblical sense is much more than mere physical existence and in fact involves more than

³G.A. Cooke, Ezekiel. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1970), p. 200.

⁴John B. Taylor, Ezekiel. P. 147.

⁵D.M.G. Stalker, Ezekiel. p. 163.

material well-being, although of course neither of these accents is wholly absent.”⁶

Corporate and communal responsibility are acts, and the experience of the Jews bore witness to this. But Ezekiel would have them to see that these were not the only facts. “God’s redeemed community is a nation of righteous or repentant individuals. And in the situation with which the prophet was immediately concerned, it was dangerous for the exiles to be concealing themselves behind an unbalanced view of their national responsibility in order to avoid the prophetic demand for repentance and a new say of life.”⁷

Ezekiel is saying that regardless of the circumstances in which man may find himself, he alone has the power to determine his life and death in relationship with God. he may or may not be responsible for physical surroundings, that is exile or captivity, but he is directly responsible for his relationship with God. and he cannot use a bad experience (exile) as an excuse to keep from turning to god and living a righteous life.

The second section considers the question, “Is God Equal” in His dealings with man:

Ezekiel 18:25-32

Yet ye say, The way of the Lord is not equal. Hear now, O house of Israel: is not my way equal? Are not your ways un-equal? When the righteous man turneth away from his righteousness, and committeth iniquity, and dieth therein in his iniquity that he hath done shall die. Again, when the wicked man turneth away from his wickedness that he hath committed, and doeth that which is lawful and right, he shall save his soul alive. Because he considereth, and turneth away from all his transgressions that he hath committed, he shall surely live, he shall not die. Yet saith the house of Israel, The way of the Lord is not equal. O house of Israel, are not my ways equal? Are not your ways unequal? Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways, saith the Lord Jehovah. Return ye, and turn yourselves from all your transgressions; so iniquity shall not be your ruin. Cast away from you all your transgressions, wherein ye have transgressed; and make you a new heart and a new spirit; for why will ye die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth, saith the Lord Jehovah: wherefore turn yourselves, and live.

The ultimate evasion of self-examination occurs as the people try to blame God for their predicament. The people say, “the way of the Lord is not just” (vv 25-29).

⁶Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, “Ezekiel 18:25-32”. Interpretation. 1978), p. 300.

⁷John B. Taylor, Ezekiel. p. 148.

In this context “way” means “principle of action”.⁸

Ezekiel sets out to vindicate God’s justice by declaring that it is not God who is “unequal”, but rather it is Israel. God’s position is stated as, “I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth” (v. 32a). But rather, “turn yourselves and live” (v. 32b).

Having established individual responsibility, he also established individual possibility. “Turn yourselves” is a declaration that it is within the power of each individual to re-direct his life. “Here we see the individual man’s life freed from being fettered by the sum of all the deeds he has so far done, which keep him from turning round from the course he has once begun.”⁹

Man is not benefitted or handicapped by either his, or is ancestral past. When man meets God what is decisive is his own state at that moment, his total orientation of life. “When God confronts him with ‘life’ or ‘death’, what is decisive is his state of that moment; if, though once righteous, he is wicked, his previous righteousness is of no avail to him, he then ‘dies’. And conversely. God’s ways are therefore perfectly just; it is human judgment that is illogical.”¹⁰

If blame could be placed on previous generations Israel could shrug off any sense of sin and accuse God of being “unjust”. This would excuse them of self-examination and need for reformation of life.

In this entire section Ezekiel presents the truth that God desires not the death but the repentance of the wicked, and that each individual is both free and responsible for his own actions.

“The ultimate goal is the corporate renewal which can come as people turn, one by one, from their murmuring against God and against each other and begin instead to reinforce one another in the doing of God’s will.”¹¹

The entire passage revolves round two questions: Does the son bear the iniquity of the father? And if so, “Is God equal”?

The Jews argument for an affirmative answer to these questions, was in the fact that they were in captivity, not just for their own sins, but because of the sins of their fathers. They were avoiding even considering individual repentance, which would have been difficult and costly, by shifting the blame upon their ancestral past. And claiming that even if they repented they would still suffer for the sins of others.

⁸Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, “Ezekiel 18:25-32”. p. 300.

⁹Walter Eichrodt, Ezekiel. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1970), p. 241.

¹⁰D.M.G. Stalker, Ezekiel. p. 163.

¹¹Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, “Ezekiel 18:25-32”, p. 286.

God, through Ezekiel, answers that it was sin, national sin, theirs and the generations that had gone before them that had brought about the downfall of the nation. But in the matter of the individual, God judges him according to what he is doing, not by what has been done, or is being done by the nation.

That God is “equal” or “just” is then proven by Ezekiel. if the son does righteously, he shall live. But the soul that sins, it shall die. Each father, and each son is responsible for his own life (future). The wicked can repent and live, which is God’s desire, because He has no pleasure in the death of the wicked. When he repents (“turn yourselves”) his past acts of sin will not condemn him. Or the righteous can return to the way of the wicked, but if he does, he will die. His past acts of righteousness will not save him. So whether one “lives” or “dies” depends upon what he does.

The equality of God in thus dealing with each individual according to his own acts was undeniable just. It was Israel who was unjust or unequal, in attempting to escape their own personal responsibility by hiding behind a false proverb. With the destruction of the proverb, they are left without excuse.

They are both responsible and free to choose their own future. “Why will ye die, O house of Israel” when God desires that you “turn yourselves and live.”