

A Call to Repentance

Ezekiel 18:1-13, 30-32
SS Lesson for 08/16/2015

Devotional Scripture: 2 Cor 7:8-12

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Introduction

Overview and Key Verse of the Lesson

The lesson describes one of God's requirements from His people who sin is **A Call to Repentance**. The **study's aim** is to understand the importance of personal responsibility and culpability in the context of the new covenant of grace. The **study's application** is to identify an area of blame-shifting in our lives and make a plan for change.

(Adapted from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary)

Key Verse: Ezekiel 18:30-31

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?"

Commentary from The Bible Knowledge Commentary

Ezekiel had delivered three parables to convict the nation of her sin (chaps. 15-17). He then returned to the bluntness of a direct message to drive home the fact of Israel's guilt. The message in chapter 18 is similar to that in 12:21-28, for they both answered the people's proverbs that denied their coming judgment.

God asked Ezekiel about a **proverb** being circulated. This proverb—**The fathers eat sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge**—must have been well known in Israel because Jeremiah also quoted it (cf. Jer. 31:29-30). The proverb's point was that children were suffering because of their parents' sins. True, Jerusalem was suffering, but as stated in the proverb the people thought they were suffering not because of *their* sins but because of their *parents'* sins. So these people were blaming God for punishing them unjustly (cf. Ezek. 18:25). God saw that this false **proverb** had to be refuted. Yet, as with all false doctrines, a kernel of truth in the teaching made it seem plausible. In the Ten Commandments God indicated that He was "a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate Me" (Ex. 20:5). This same threat was repeated in Exodus 34:6-7 and Deuteronomy 5:9. Even Ezekiel had traced God's coming judgment back to the people's past actions (cf. Ezek. 16:15-29). But the point of these passages was that the *effects* of sin are serious and long-lasting, not that God capriciously punishes the innocent for their ancestors' evil ways.

Blaming others for their misfortunes, the people were denying their own guilt. This was wrong because every individual is personally responsible to God. **For every living soul belongs to Me, the father as well as the son.** Those who are guilty will receive their own deserved punishment. **The soul who sins is the one who will die** (cf. 18:20). The people of **Israel** could not rightly charge God with injustice. Ezekiel then presented three "cases" to prove the principle of individual responsibility. Each hypothetical situation begins with **Suppose** (vv. 5, 10, 14). The cases are those of a righteous man who does right (vv. 5-9), a violent son of a righteous father (vv. 10-13), and a righteous son of a violent father (vv. 14-18). In each Ezekiel described the individual's actions and God's response. The first hypothetical case was that of a **man** who was **righteous** and who followed God's Law with all his heart (vv. 5-9). He was not guilty of idolatry. **He did not eat at the mountain shrines** (cf. 8:12; 16:24-25, 31, 39; 18:15; 22:9) **or look to the idols**. The "mountain shrines" were the high places scattered throughout Israel where idolatry was practiced (see comments on 6:3-7). The "idols" were the foreign images being worshiped by the people (cf. chap. 8; 16:20-25). The righteous man was also careful to keep the portions of the Law pertaining to his fellow Israelites. He kept himself morally pure. Both adultery (Ex. 20:14; Lev. 20:10) and intercourse during the menstrual **period** (Lev. 18:19) were prohibited by the Mosaic Law. The righteous man in Ezekiel's hypothetical case faithfully maintained sexual purity.

Ezekiel's model Israelite was also careful **not to oppress** his fellow Israelites. He would not keep collateral **for a loan** which the borrower needed (cf. Ex. 22:26; Deut. 24:6). He would never **commit robbery**, or forcibly take anything from a fellow Israelite (Ex. 20:15). He did the opposite; he gave **food and clothing** to the needy. His concern was how he could help others, not what he could get from them. If this righteous man loaned something to a fellow Israelite, he did not try to profit on the deal by **usury** (an exorbitant interest rate). **Take excessive interest** could be translated "take interest" (NIV marg.) in light of the first part of the sentence. The Law prohibited any charging of interest on loans made to fellow Israelites (Deut. 23:19-20); this man carefully followed the Law. He put God's Law ahead of financial gain. This righteous person was compassionate (not **doing wrong**) and fair (judging **fairly between man and man**). He faithfully kept the highest standards of conduct demanded by God's **laws** for His covenant people. The **righteous** Israelite would **surely live**. He would be spared from judgment (cf. 14:12-20) and would not suffer for the sins of others. The vast majority of Jerusalem's inhabitants were *not* righteous. Therefore the implication is that they would be punished for their sins. Ezekiel moved to his second hypothetical situation. **Suppose** the righteous man **has a rebellious (violent) son** who commits sins his **father** had avoided (cf. vv. 11-13a with vv. 8-9). God's verdict on this man was unfavorable. He would **be put to death and his blood would be on his own head**. The father's righteousness would not benefit his son (cf. 14:16, 18). This confirmed the fallacy of the people's proverb (18:2) and the truth of God's principle (v. 4). Ezekiel's third case continued to follow this hypothetical family. **Suppose** (cf. "suppose" in vv. 5, 10) **this wicked son has a son who sees all the sins of his father but does not do such things** himself. Instead of following in the sin of his father, this son followed in the righteous path of his grandfather (cf. vv. 15-16 with vv. 6-9).

God's conclusion is obvious: **He will not die for his father's sin; he will surely live**. A righteous son will not be punished for his father's evil deeds. **But his father will die for his own sin**. The proverb being quoted (v. 2) was incorrect. When the people were judged, it was not for the sins of someone in a former generation. Only those who remained faithful to God would be delivered (v. 19). (By the word **live** Ezekiel meant escaping punishment in this life. See comments on v. 24.) Ezekiel then repeated his point: **The soul who sins is the one who will die** (v. 20; cf. v. 4). However, escape from judgment was possible. Sinners could avoid judgment if they repented of their **sins** by turning **from** them (cf. Prov. 28:13) and kept God's **decrees**. Ezekiel was not teaching salvation by works. First, he was speaking of a temporal deliverance from Babylon's armies rather than eternal deliverance from the second death (Ezek. 18:13). Second, he clearly indicated that these righteous works would spring only from a "new heart and a new spirit" (v. 31). Good works result from a changed life; they do not bring about such a change. Why would God allow a sinner who repented to avoid judgment? The answer lies in God's character. He takes no **pleasure in the death of the wicked** (cf. v. 32). Instead, He is **pleased when they turn from their ways**. God is not a petty despot who holds grudges and longs to inflict punishment on those who wrong Him. As a God of grace He longs for people to forsake their wickedness and turn to His righteous ways. Though God forgives the sins of those who turn to righteousness, He does not excuse the sins of someone who has been walking in **righteousness** and then **turns** to wickedness. **Will such a person live? None of the righteous things he has done will be remembered**. God was not saying that a saved Israelite would lose his salvation if he fell into sin. Both the blessing and the judgment in view here are temporal, not eternal. The judgment was physical death (cf. vv. 4, 20, 26), not eternal damnation. An Israelite who had followed God's Law but who later turned to idolatry or immorality could not expect his past righteousness to negate his present **sins**. God does not balance an individual's good deeds against his bad deeds to determine his fate. An individual's relationship with God when the judgment arrives determines whether he will live or **die**. Israel had charged God with unrighteousness, but God now turned the tables. **Is My way unjust? Is it not your ways that are unjust?** (cf. v. 29; Job 40:8).

Ezekiel reminded Israel of the responsibility for sin borne by each member of the nation. **I will judge you, each one according to his ways**. If Israel fell, it would be for the sins of her own generation. Because of this, the nation needed to **repent** if she hoped to escape. Israel needed spiritual renewal. The people needed to get **rid... of their offenses** and **get a new heart and a new spirit** (cf. Ezek. 11:19; 36:26). The

life or death of the people depended on their individual responses to God. Those who continued to rebel would **die**; those who repented and turned from sin would **live**.

Lesson Introduction and Background

From the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

I was sitting on a bench in a mall the first time I saw the saying printed on a T-shirt worn by a young man. It simply read, "Blame my parents." That witticism is both appealing and appalling at the same time. It has a certain appeal because there is some truth in it: the young man is who he is in large part because of the inherited characteristics (heredity) and upbringing (environment) of and by his parents. It is also appealing when one considers the psychological comfort that results when people use it to relieve themselves of responsibility for who they are and what they have done. On the other hand, the slogan is appalling because it expresses attitudes of fatalism and irresponsibility by implying that the young man is completely controlled by genetics (nature) and/or upbringing (nurture). Having had no control over either, the slogan proposes that he isn't responsible for who he is and what he does. What a miserable condition all people would be in if this were true! The young man's T-shirt expresses a popular view today that our bad behavior is not our fault. It is the fault of others. Although the people of Ezekiel's day did not know about genes and probably did not engage in the "nature vs. nurture" debate, they too found comfort by passing the blame back to their ancestors. They did so in the form of a proverb condemned in today's lesson.

Ezekiel, a contemporary of Jeremiah, prophesied during and after the final chaotic years of the kingdom of Judah. King Jehoiakim, whose reign in Judah ended in 597 BC, was succeeded by his son Jehoiachin. He reigned only three months before the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem and took him, along with thousands of the most prominent and skilled people of Judah, to Babylon (2 Kings 24:14). This group of deportees included the prophet Ezekiel (Ezekiel 1:1-3). The Babylonians placed Zedekiah, Jehoiachin's uncle, on the throne in Jerusalem to implement the will of the Babylonian government (2 Kings 24:17). Zedekiah eventually conspired with other nations to revolt, but this did not succeed. The Babylonians put down the rebellion and destroyed Jerusalem and the temple in 586 BC. While Jeremiah was preaching in Jerusalem before its destruction, Ezekiel lived with a community of fellow exiles in Babylon. He ministered to a people who had been torn from the land that God had promised them, away from the temple where he promised his presence to be, away from all that was familiar. As they pondered and grieved their situation, what lessons would they learn?

Major Theme Analysis

(Scriptural Text from the New King James Version; cross-references from the NIV)

Repentance Requires Correct Interpretation (Ezek 18:1-4)

- 1 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.

Beware of man's traditions (1-2)

Beware of traditions based on principles of the world (Col 2:8)

8 See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.

Beware of traditions that break the command of God (Matt 15:2-4)

2 "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat!" 3 Jesus replied, "And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?"

Beware of traditions by being ready to change when God reveals the truth (Gal 1:14-16)

14 I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers. 15 But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased 16 to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not consult any man,

Know that God owns our souls (3-4)

Owns our souls because God is the God of our spirit (Num 16:22)

22 But Moses and Aaron fell facedown and cried out, "O God, God of the spirits of all mankind, will you be angry with the entire assembly when only one man sins?"

Owns our souls because God is the Father of our spirit (Heb 12:9)

9 Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live!

Owns our souls because it returns to God at physical death (Eccl 12:6-8)

6 Remember him — before the silver cord is severed, or the golden bowl is broken; before the pitcher is shattered at the spring, or the wheel broken at the well, 7 and the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.

Repentance Requires Taking Responsibility (Ezek 18:5-13)

5 But if a man is just And does what is lawful and right;
6 If 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.
10 "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.

Responsibility to live righteously (5-9)

Live righteously because the Day of the Lord is near (2 Peter 3:10-12)

10 But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare. 11 Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives 12 as

you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat.

Live righteously because Jesus sacrificed Himself for it (1 Peter 2:24)

24 He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.

Live righteously because God's Divine power provides everything we need to do so (2 Peter 1:3)

3 His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.

Live righteously because we are commanded to do so (1 Tim 6:11)

11 But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness.

Responsibility to not live unrighteously (10-13)

Because unrighteousness is condemned through God's word (Rom 7:7-9)

7 What shall we say, then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, "Do not covet." 8 But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire. For apart from law, sin is dead. 9 Once I was alive apart from law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died.

Because unrighteousness is revealed through how one lives (1 John 3:10)

10 This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother.

Because unrighteousness is punished by God (Rom 1:18)

18 The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness,

Repentance Is Allowed By God's Mercy (Ezek 18:30-32)

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!

Mercy in allowing repentance in judgment (30-31)

Because mercy triumphs over judgment (James 2:13)

13 because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!

Because God's mercy keeps God from putting an end to the wicked (Neh 9:30-31)

30 For many years you were patient with them. By your Spirit you admonished them through your prophets. Yet they paid no attention, so you handed them over to the neighboring peoples. 31 But in your great mercy you did not put an end to them or abandon them, for you are a gracious and merciful God.

Because God's mercy sometimes causes Him to relent (Ps 106:45)

45 for their sake he remembered his covenant and out of his great love he relented.

Mercy due to God taking no pleasure in death (32)

God is merciful and does not willingly want man to suffer or die (Lam 3:33)

33 For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to the children of men.

God is merciful because He wants everyone to repent (2 Peter 3:9)

9 The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

God is merciful even in the death of the wicked (Ezek 33:11)

11 Say to them, 'As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?'

Conclusion and Other Thoughts

Commentary Thoughts from Dr. Thomas Constable

Verse 1-2

The Lord told Ezekiel to ask the people what they meant when they used a proverb that implied that the present generation of Israelites was suffering because of the sins of their forefathers (cf. Jeremiah 31:29). They were claiming to be the innocent victims of the actions of others, blaming others for their condition. In this they sounded just like many in our own day who refuse to take personal responsibility for their actions.

"The problem that the proverb poses for Ezekiel is not with punishment that children are bearing for the sins of the fathers, or even the issue of theodicy [i.e., the justice of God]. On the contrary, it reflects a materialistic fatalism, a resignation to immutable cosmic rules of cause and effect, an embittered paralysis of the soul, that has left the exiles without hope and without God. To the extent that the charge concerns God at all, it accuses him of disinterest or impotence in the face of the exiles' current crisis. All these years they have put their trust in their divine patron, only to discover that they are victims of an immutable law of the universe: the fate of one generation is inexorably determined by the actions of the previous. Their theology and their God have betrayed them.

"Ezekiel will have none of this. In fact, the proverb becomes the point of departure for an extended lecture on a universe with unlimited room for movement, and for divine grace open to all who will listen." [Note: Block, *The Book . . .*, p. 561.]

Earlier the Lord had told this same audience that other people would quote the proverb, "Like mother, like daughter" (Ezekiel 16:44). This proverb expressed the fact that the Israelites were behaving as the Canaanites did. Ezekiel himself had said that the sufferings of the Exile were traceable to the persistent rebellion, idolatry, and unfaithfulness of former generations of Israelites (ch. 16). Now Ezekiel's hearers concluded that God was being unfair in punishing them for their ancestors' sins. They may have cited what they thought was biblical support for this conclusion because even earlier the Lord had said that He would visit the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hated Him (Exodus 20:5; Exodus 34:6-7; Deuteronomy 5:9).

It is true that the sins of parents result in consequences for their children, grandchildren, and even great-grandchildren that we might call the "fallout" of the parents' sins. But it is not correct to say that God "punishes" children because their parents have sinned. This is the conclusion that the Israelites in exile had drawn and that this chapter refutes (cf. Jeremiah 31:27-30; Lamentations 5:7). True, some of what Ezekiel's hearers were experiencing were the consequences of the sins of former generations. But God was judging them personally because they were personally responsible for their actions that were sinful (cf. Ezekiel 3:16-21; Ezekiel 14:12-20; Ezekiel 33:1-20). God had revealed this principle of individual responsibility long ago (cf. Genesis 2:17; Genesis 4:7; Deuteronomy 24:16; 2 Kings 14:6). [Note: See further, Robert B. Chisholm Jr., "How a Hermeneutical Virus Can Corrupt Theological Systems," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 166:663 (July-September 2009):263-64.]

An illustration of this important distinction may help. Suppose a child grew up in a home in which the parents had no respect for God and, therefore, set a very bad example for their child. The child would naturally follow their lead and learn some sinful attitudes and actions. His parents' influence would adversely taint the child's life. However, God would not take out His wrath on that child because of his parents' sins. He would rather deal with that child on the basis of his or her own attitudes and actions.

Parental influence extends beyond their actions to their characters and even perhaps to their genes. Children of an addicted parent, for example, often have a predisposition to the same or a similar addiction. Parents who have indulged their temptations to sexual promiscuity not infrequently see their own children grow up unusually vulnerable to this temptation. Parents with certain character flaws often note the same weaknesses in their children. Yet the child's will to follow God, enabled by His grace and Spirit, can overcome "hereditary sin."

Verses 1-4

The principle 18:1-4

Verse 3

The Lord instructed the people not to use this proverb in Israel any more. It implied something about God's dealings with them that was not true. No one can excuse his or her sinfulness on the basis of his or her ancestors. Human beings are free to make their own decisions, and we are responsible for the consequences of those decisions.

"The implication is clear that man has the ability to determine his final condition." [Note: Feinberg, pp. 102-3.]

Other passages stress the sovereignty of God and may appear to contradict this clear revelation of human responsibility (e.g., Romans 9; Ephesians 1). Nevertheless both are true even though we cannot understand how both can be true. Their truthfulness lies in the truthfulness of the One who revealed them, not in our ability to comprehend them, which is limited by our humanity and obscured by our sinfulness.

Verse 4

The true principle, in contrast to their proverb, was that everyone is personally responsible to God, the present generation and former generations. We bear the guilt of our own sinfulness, which results in our death, not the guilt of someone else (cf. Ezekiel 3:18-21). "Souls" (Heb. *nephesh*) means "lives" (cf. Ezekiel 13:20), not disembodied spirits.

"The story of Achan in Joshua 7:1-26 is a classic example of corporate responsibility. Achan sinned, but his whole family suffered for his sin. Such a passage is difficult to understand unless we see the biblical distinction between guilt and consequences. In Achan's case he was the guilty party (Ezekiel 7:21), but his family, who may have shared guilt by remaining silent about his misdeed, shared at least the consequences of his guilt, which was death by stoning. This was the point made in Exodus 20:5; Exodus 34:6-7.

Individually each person is responsible for his or her own guilt of sin. But we must always be aware that

the consequences of sin will affect others who may be innocent of the guilt for that particular sin. This is true even when the sin is forgiven. God promised to remove the guilt of sin, but most often the consequences remain. David is a good example. Though he was forgiven of his sins of adultery and murder, he still suffered the consequences (2 Samuel 12:11-20)." [Note: Cooper, pp. 189-90.]

Verse 5-6

If a person behaved righteously and obeyed the Mosaic Law, that person would live. This is the basic point. Evidence of righteousness before God was typically obedience to specific commands in the Law. The Lord cited five types of behavior that manifested departure from the will of God under the Mosaic Law.

First, eating ceremonial meals at idol shrines and trusting in idols were forbidden but practiced by the Jews in Ezekiel's day (cf. Deuteronomy 12:2-4). This was a violation of the first four commandments in the Decalogue that required exclusive allegiance to Yahweh.

Second, committing adultery and having sex with a woman during her menstrual period were practiced even though God prohibited them (Exodus 20:14; Leviticus 15:24; Leviticus 18:19; Leviticus 20:10; Leviticus 20:18; Deuteronomy 22:22). The prohibition against having intercourse with one's wife during her period was clear in the Mosaic Law, but when Jesus terminated that code as the basis for believers' conduct this law no longer remained binding on believers (Hebrews 7:11-12). The New Covenant teaching of believers' present duties says nothing about this practice. It is now a matter of choice (liberty) for believers.

This and the following three cases are examples of the fifth through the tenth commandments that specify how one should treat other people. With regard to himself, the righteous man maintained his moral and ceremonial purity even in the privacy of his marital life.

Verses 5-9

The case of the righteous father 18:5-9

Verses 5-18

The illustrations 18:5-18

Three cases illustrate this principle: a father doing right (Ezekiel 18:5-9), his son doing evil (Ezekiel 18:10-13), and his grandson doing right (Ezekiel 18:14-18). In each case Ezekiel described the individual's actions and the Lord's responses.

Verse 7

Third, oppressing others and not returning something given as collateral when someone returned what he had borrowed were violations of the covenant (Exodus 22:26-27; Deuteronomy 24:6). This is an example of life within the covenant community but outside the marriage relationship.

Fourth, not robbing but instead providing food and clothing to the needy were commanded (Deuteronomy 15:11; Deuteronomy 24:19-22; cf. Isaiah 58:7). Both of the examples in this verse deal with one's relationships to the neighbor inside and outside Israel. Both examples also specify the correct action in contrast to the incorrect.

Verse 8

Fifth, not charging interest of other Israelites or practicing iniquity but providing true justice and faithfully doing all that God required of His people further represented doing God's will. The selfishness of the Jewish usurers cut to the very heart of their sinfulness. Again, God specified correct conduct as well as condemning sin (cf. Ezekiel 18:7).

Verse 9

In sum, the Israelite who lived by the Mosaic standards was righteous in behavior and could anticipate a long life of blessing from God (Leviticus 18:1-5; Deuteronomy 11; Deuteronomy 26:16-19; Deuteronomy 30:15-20; cf. Philippians 3:6). Clearly one's attitudes and actions toward other people demonstrate his or her attitudes and actions toward God.

Verses 10-13

The case of the wicked son 18:10-13

Such a righteous person might have an unrighteous son who violently shed the blood of others. This son might do all the bad things that his father avoided doing and might fail to do all the good things that his father did. He would die for his own sins; the responsibility for his death would be his own.

Verses 14-18

The case of the righteous grandson 18:14-18

This sinful son might have a son who observed his father's behavior and chose to follow the example of his righteous grandfather rather than that of his unrighteous father. He refrained from the same evil practices and engaged in the same forms of goodness. That man would surely live for his righteousness whereas his father would die for his wickedness. Wicked parents do not necessarily produce wicked children because the children can choose to do right. The Israelites had illustrations of this alternation of good and evil individuals in succeeding generations even in the royal family. King Hezekiah, for example, was good, his son Manasseh was bad, and Manasseh's grandson Josiah was good.

" . . . in this world God does indeed punish entire *groups* for the sins that they *as groups* commit, even when some members of the group may be innocent. Such groups are often nations, cities, or other political entities, but they may also be societal groups such as priests or prophets, or economic groups such as businesses or trade guilds, or such voluntary associations as churches." [Note: Stuart, p. 155.]

Verse 19-20

The Israelites were claiming that a righteous son (themselves) would die for his father's (their ancestors') wickedness. But this was not true. Individuals who practiced righteousness would experience God's covenant promise of blessing on their lives even though their fathers practiced wickedness. People die for their own sins, not for the sins of their fathers or the sins of their sons. Likewise people who behave righteously experience the consequences of their personal conduct just as people who behave unrighteously do. Jeremiah, for example, did not die in the Babylonian invasion of Jerusalem.

It is true that we are sinners not only because we practice sin personally (Romans 3:23; Romans 6:23) but also because we were born with a sinful human nature that we inherited from our parents (Psalms 51:5; Ephesians 2:3; Galatians 5:17) and because God imputed the sin of Adam to us (Romans 5:12-21). However here the point is that people do not die for the sins of their parents, grandparents, children, or grandchildren but for their own sins.

Verses 19-23

The first objection: God's conduct 18:19-23

God proceeded to adopt a dialogical teaching style in which He both asked and answered questions about individual responsibility. This style is quite similar to the Greek diatribe, which Paul used frequently in his writings (e.g., in Romans).

Verse 21-22

If a wicked person repented of his wickedness and pursued righteous behavior, he would live and not die. God would pardon his sins because he had turned from them and practiced righteousness. For the Jews still in Jerusalem this might mean deliverance from death at the hands of Babylon's invading soldiers.

This did not mean that doing good works would atone for past sins eternally. It meant that doing good works could preclude God's judgment of premature physical death, a judgment promised under the Mosaic Law for those who practiced wickedness. This whole chapter deals with the consequences of good and bad conduct *in this life* under the Mosaic Covenant. It does not deal with the subject of eternal life. Eternal life has always come to a person by faith alone (Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:5; Ephesians 2:8-9).

"The stipulations of the Mosaic covenant were given to a people who were already in a trusting relationship with God. These stipulations provided a concrete, practical outworking of faith in the God who redeemed Israel from Egypt and gave the people his law.... If they obeyed these commands, they would show their righteousness, receive God's blessings, and live. But if they failed to live according to God's ways as revealed in the law, the Mosaic covenant declared that even those who had believed ... would die physically (cf. Deuteronomy 28:58-66; Deuteronomy 30:15-20)." [Note: Alexander, "Ezekiel," p. 824.]

Verse 23

"Why would God allow a sinner who repented to avoid judgment? The answer lies in God's character." [Note: Dyer, "Ezekiel," p. 1261.]

God explained that He took no delight in people dying because of their sins. What gave Him pleasure was their turning from their sinful conduct and so continuing to live.

"Such a longing should be shared by every preacher who ventures to speak about the judgment of God." [Note: Taylor, p. 151.]

Verse 24

A turn in the other direction would have the same result. If a person turned from righteous conduct and pursued a life of sin, God would punish him with premature death for his sins even though he had formerly done right.

"An individual's relationship with God when the judgment arrives determines whether he will live or die." [Note: Dyer, "Ezekiel," p. 1261. Cf. The New Scofield ..., p. 857.]

"A generation is not predetermined for judgment or for blessing by the previous one. Even within a generation, or within an individual life, the past does not necessarily determine the present or the future." [Note: Cooper, p. 191.]

"Ezekiel has hereby repudiated the notion of a 'treasury of merit or demerit' on two counts. First, one generation cannot build up such a treasure [*sic*] for another; each individual determines his or her own destiny by his or her own conduct. Second, an individual cannot build up such a treasury in one phase of his or her life and count on this to balance off a deficit later." [Note: Block, The Book . . . , p. 583.]

Verses 24-29

The second objection: God's justice 18:24-29

The Jews to whom Ezekiel ministered went beyond questioning God's conduct. They also questioned His justice.

Verse 25

In spite of God's righteous dealings with people on the basis of their conduct, the Israelites were accusing Him of not doing right. The Lord asked if it was their ways rather than His that were not right.

Verses 26-28

The Lord repeated for clarification that turning to sin results in death but turning from sin (obeying God's covenant stipulations) results in life (cf. Ezekiel 18:21-22; Ezekiel 18:24; Romans 6:23). Clearly He meant that a final turning is in view rather than a superficial or temporary turning. If a person abandons God to pursue a life without God (i.e., apostasy), or vice versa, the result will be death or life respectively.

"The reference is not to a temporary lapse, but to a persistent choice of evil which changes the course of a man's life." [Note: Taylor, p. 151.]

Verse 29

Nevertheless the Israelites were claiming that God's ways were not right. It was really their ways that were not right (cf. Ezekiel 18:25).

Verse 30

In closing, God promised to judge each Israelite according to his or her own conduct. He urged His people to turn from their transgressions of His law so their sins would not prove to be what tripped them up as they journeyed through life.

Verses 30-32

The appeal 18:30-32

Verse 31

They needed to adopt a new heart attitude, a new spirit, a spirit of compliance to God's will. It was unnecessary that they die prematurely for their sins when they could turn from them and continue to live (cf. Romans 13:14).

Verse 32

This death among His people gave the Lord no pleasure (cf. Ezekiel 18:23; Isaiah 28:21; John 5:40; 1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9). He called them to change their attitude, to practice obedience to the covenant, and to live. Repentance was possible for the generation of Jews to whom Ezekiel ministered in Babylon.

God still deals with people in the same righteous manner under the New Covenant as He did under the Old. Whereas our responsibilities under the New Covenant are somewhat different from Israel's under the Old, the Lord still holds His people personally responsible for our obedience to His will. Personal failure to obey still affects our present lives negatively, and personal obedience still affects our lives positively. As Christians we are personally responsible for our actions, just as the Israelites were. Our personal actions will affect our lives just as was true in Israel. For Christians, who live under the New Covenant, premature death may be God's judgment for sin (e.g. Acts 5:1-11; 1 Corinthians 11:30; 1 John 5:16). However, under the New Covenant what we do in this life also has eternal consequences, not that we will lose our salvation, but we will suffer the loss of some eternal rewards (Romans 14:10-12; 1 Corinthians 3:8-15; 2 Corinthians 5:10). [Note: For an exegetical study of believers' rewards under the New Covenant, see Joseph C. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings: A Study of Eternal Security and the Final Significance of Man*, pp. 515-32. For a more popular treatment of the same subject, I recommend Joe L. Wall, *Going for the Gold*. See also the Doctrinal Statement of Dallas Theological Seminary, Article XVI: *The Christian's Service*, par. 2.] The Lord normally gave Old Testament saints the hope that their reward would come before they died (but see Daniel 12:2-3; Daniel 12:13), but He has given Christians the hope that our reward will come mainly after we die. God has always justified people for their trust in Him, and He has always rewarded them for their works.

"The Church in every generation must be alerted to a future judgment seat that is to be a sober constraint and incentive in present living (Romans 14:10; Romans 14:12; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Galatians 6:7-8). The necessity of continuance in the faith and in a lifestyle that commends it is backed by grave provisos from which no believer is exempt (Romans 11:22; 1 Corinthians 15:2; Colossians 1:23; Hebrews 3:14)." [Note: Allen, p. 281.]

"Few units in Ezekiel match ch. 18 for the transparency and permanent relevance of their message." [Note: Block, The Book . . . , p. 589.]

(Adapted from URL:<http://www.studylight.org/commentaries/dcc/view.cgi?bk=25&ch=18>)

Concluding Thoughts from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

Ezekiel teaches us how a person is to respond to the condition of a community. It is true that each generation influences the next, but none controls what its successor does. A generation is not predetermined for blessings or judgments by actions of the previous one. The individual and the generation of which he or she is part of have freedom to choose how to live: either walking the path of God or the path of rebellion. Those who keep God's Word will live; those who rebel will die. Each will bear his or her own iniquity. Even if a person lives in a grossly immoral society, that is not to be an excuse for sin. Rather, living in such a society is all the more reason to do what is just, right, and true. Ezekiel also teaches us that individuals form the overall tone of communities. The choices of individuals determine the spiritual and moral condition of the whole. God desires that each individual turn to him and thus help build strong and righteous communities. The choices each person makes today will have more impact on determining the condition of the community than either heredity or environment.

Practical Points from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator

1. We cannot blame anyone else for the suffering we experience due to our sin (Ezek. 18:1-3)
2. Each one of us is personally answerable to God (vs. 4)
3. Following the Lord brings rewards now and forever (Ezek. 18:5-9; cf. I Cor. 3:12-14)
4. It is the one we trust and follow that counts with God, not the people we know or are related to {Ezek. 18:10-13}
5. True repentance means abandoning our sins, not just being sorry for them (vs. 31)
6. Like God, we should confront people with their sins out of love for them (vs. 32)