

Preaching to the Exiles

Ezekiel 18:1-9, 30-32
SS Lesson for 05/23/2021

Devotional Scripture: Jer 31:27-34

OUTLINE

LESSON BACKGROUND AND KEY VERSE

Background from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

Key Verse: Ezekiel 18:4

Commentary from the Bible Knowledge Commentary

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Traditions based on rules taught by man (Mark 7:5-8)

Traditions based on culture (Gal 1:14)

Traditions based on human commands (Col 2:22)

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Owned by God because Jesus died for us (2 Cor 5:15)

Owned by God because Jesus redeemed us (Titus 2:14)

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COMMENTARY THOUGHTS FROM DR. THOMAS CONSTABLE
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Lesson Background and Key Verse

Background from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

Ezekiel, a contemporary of Jeremiah, prophesied during and after the final chaotic years of the kingdom of Judah. He was called by God “in the fourth month on the fifth day, the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin” (Ezekiel 1:1-2). Jehoiachin reigned only three months in 597 BC 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 detail dates the beginning of Ezekiel’s book in 592 BC. The group of deportees included the prophet Ezekiel (Ezekiel 1:1-3). The ruin of Jerusalem was devastating for the exiles. Jeremiah’s book of Lamentations captures the anguish that the destruction of the city and loss of human life caused. Though some were left in Jerusalem and wider Judah, the survivors to whom Ezekiel spoke were those taken away to Babylon. They lived together by the river Kebar. The Babylonian exile created great uncertainty about the people’s relationship with God. Could God, who had allowed his holy city to be ravaged and his people carried into exile, still care for the people? And if he still cared, could he actually take care of them in a foreign nation?

Key Verse: Ezekiel 18:4

“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.

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.

18:1-4. 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.

18:5-6a. 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 6:3-7). The “idols” were the foreign images being worshiped by the people (cf. chap. 8; 16:20-25).

18:6b-8a. 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.

18:8b-9. 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.

18:10-13. 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).

18:14-20. 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 v. 24.) Ezekiel then repeated his point: **The soul who sins is the one who will die** (v. 20; cf. v. 4).

18:21-23. 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.

18:24. 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**.

18:25-32. 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**.

Major Theme Analysis

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

A False Proverb Refuted (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.

Proverb based on tradition of people (1-2)

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.

Traditions based on rules taught by man (Mark 7:5-8)

5 So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, "Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with 'unclean' hands?" 6 He replied, "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: "'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. 7 They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.' 8 You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men."

Traditions based on culture (Gal 1:14)

14 I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers.

Traditions based on human commands (Col 2:22)

22 These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings.

Traditions based on worldly standards (Eph 2:1-2)

1 As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, 2 in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.

Proverb rejected by God who owns the soul (3-4)

Owned by God because we were bought with a price (1 Cor 6:18-20)

18 Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body. 19 Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; 20 you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.

Owned by God because He made us (Ps 100:3)

3 Know that the Lord is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture.

Owned by God because Jesus died for us (2 Cor 5:15)

15 And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.

Owned by God because Jesus redeemed us (Titus 2:14)

14 who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.

A Righteousness Commended (Ezek 18:5-9)

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.

Righteousness through justice (5)

Justice that comes from righteous wisdom (Ps 37:30)

30 The mouth of the righteous man utters wisdom, and his tongue speaks what is just.

Justice that comes from the plans of the righteous (Prov 12:5)

5 The plans of the righteous are just, but the advice of the wicked is deceitful.

Justice that comes from doing right (Prov 21:3)

3 To do what is right and just is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice.

Justice that comes from insight (Ps 119:98-100)

98 Your commands make me wiser than my enemies, for they are ever with me. 99 I have more insight than all my teachers, for I meditate on your statutes. 100 I have more understanding than the elders, for I obey your precepts.

Righteousness through obedience (6-8)

Obedience is better because it delights God (1 Sam 15:22)

22 But Samuel replied: "Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams.

Obedience leads to righteousness (Rom 6:16)

16 Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey — whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness?

Obedience keeps us remaining in God's love (John 15:10)

10 If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love.

Obedience leads to the reward of blessings (Deut 28:1-6)

1 If you fully obey the Lord your God and carefully follow all his commands I give you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations on earth. 2 All these blessings will come upon you and accompany you if you obey the Lord your God: 3 You will be blessed in the city and blessed in the country. 4 The fruit of your womb will be blessed, and the crops of your land and the young of your livestock — the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks. 5 Your basket and your kneading trough will be blessed. 6 You will be blessed when you come in and blessed when you go out.

Obedience brings the reward of freedom (James 1:25)

25 But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it — he will be blessed in what he does.

Righteousness through faithfulness (9)

Faithfulness because God reconciled us (Col 1:21-23)

21 Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. 22 But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation— 23 if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.

Faithfulness because God first loved us (John 15:9)

9 This happened so that the words he had spoken would be fulfilled: "I have not lost one of those you gave me."

Faithfulness because God is not pleased with man's unfaithfulness (Heb 10:38)

38 But my righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him."

Faithfulness because God gave us the victory (1 Cor 15:56-58)

56 The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. 57 But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. 58 Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

Faithfulness because God is faithful even when we are unfaithful (2 Tim 2:10-13)

10 Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory. 11 Here is a trustworthy saying: If we died with him, we will also live with him; 12 if we endure, we will also reign with him. If we disown him, he will also disown us; 13 if we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself.

Repent and Live (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!"

Repentance through fear of judgment (30)

Fear because God judges on what the individual does, not others (Ps 62:12)

12 and that you, O Lord, are loving. Surely you will reward each person according to what he has done.

Fear because God examines each one's conduct (Jer 17:10)

10 "I the Lord search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve."

Fear because God judges on motives that can't be hidden (1 Cor 4:5)

5 Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God.

Fear because judgment of things done while in the human body (2 Cor 5:10)

10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.

Fear because God makes what is right plain (Rom 1:18-19)

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, 19 since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.

Life through being renewed (31)

Renewed into a new creation (2 Cor 5:17)

17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!

Renewed into a spiritual covenant (Gal 6:15)

15 Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation.

Renewed inwardly daily (2 Cor 4:16)

16 Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.

Renewed from the old to the new man (Col 3:10)

10 and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.

Renewed by the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5)

5 he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit,

Life through returning to God (32)

Returning to God will result in growth in knowing God (Jer 24:7)

7 I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the Lord. They will be my people, and I will be their God, for they will return to me with all their heart.

Returning to God could bring blessings from Him (Joel 2:13-14)

13 Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity. 14 Who knows? He may turn and have pity and leave behind a blessing — grain offerings and drink offerings for the Lord your God.

Returning to God is a sign of growth in faith (Luke 17:17-19)

17 Jesus asked, "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? 18 Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" 19 Then he said to him, "Rise and go; your faith has made you well."

Returning to God brings healing of the spiritual and physical man (2 Chron 7:14)

14 if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.

Returning to God brings mercy and prosperity (Prov 28:13)

13 He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy.

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 . . .*, p561.]

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 (ch16). 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 Jeremiah, "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."

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, pp102-3.]

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 Achkan'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, pp189-90.]

Verses 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.

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.

The case of the wicked Song of Solomon (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.

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, p155.]

Verses 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 (Psalm 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.

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

Verses 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).

Verses 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," p824.]

Verse 23

"Why would God allow a sinner who repented to avoid judgment? The answer lies in God's character." [Note: Dyer, "Ezekiel," p1261.]

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, p151.]

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," p1261. Cf. The New Scofield ..., p857.]

"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, p191.]

"Ezekiel has hereby repudiated the notion of a "treasury of merit or demerit" on two counts. First, one generation cannot build up such a treasury [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 . . ., p583.]

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

Verses 24

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, p151.]

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.

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 Prayer of Manasseh*, pp515-32. 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*, par2.] 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, p281.]

"Few units in Ezekiel match ch18 for the transparency and permanent relevance of their message." [Note: Block, The Book . . . , p589.]

(Adapted from URL:<https://www.studydrive.org/commentaries/eng/dcc/ezekiel-18.html>)

Concluding Thoughts from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

The exiles imagined themselves to be the victims of a cosmic injustice. They viewed themselves as serving a sentence intended for the prior generation. The history of God's people reveals that they had always been incapable of keeping the covenant. Before Moses brought the Ten Commandments down from Mount Sinai, Aaron had already constructed the gold calf and led the people into idolatry. The book of Judges outlines the nation's checkered history of obeying God. The exiles were not unique in their ability to view themselves as morally superior to the prior generation. Jesus called out similar duplicity in the Pharisees, who insisted that if they had been alive at the time of the prophets, they would not have murdered them (Matthew 23:30). Indeed, they had already plotted to kill Jesus (12:14). The apostle Paul's words "Let God be true, and every human being a liar" (Romans 3:4) fit well in Ezekiel's defense of God's justice. The hearts of the people were always incapable of obeying God fully. So God promised a new creative act: He would give the people new hearts, ones capable of being sensitive and obedient to God's Word. This truth was intended to prevent Ezekiel's audience from slipping into the despair or apathy that came with believing they were the victims of their parents' decisions. Each person was charged with the responsibility of turning from his or her sinful ways and returning to God, in order that they would avoid being destroyed by the consequences of their own sins. This is ultimately fulfilled through following Jesus in the plan of salvation. Those who do so receive the Holy Spirit, who daily recreates our hearts and minds to be like Christ.

Concluding Thoughts from the Echoes Commentary

The Blamers - When Ezekiel preached to the exiles, they responded with cliches that snowed they took no responsibility for their troubles. A favorite saying referred to the older generation eating sour grapes, which resulted in the younger generation's suffering. This group of Israelites blamed their present adverse circumstances on the forefathers, they were unjustly punished for the sins of the previous generation. But Ezekiel said that each person has to stand before God and take responsibility for his or her actions. God was not unfair and unjust. The Lord punishes people for their sin, as they deserve it. God created all human beings and gives us every breath we take.

The Righteous - Ezekiel said that any person who lives uprightly is under no condemnation. That includes whoever eats no food offered to idols nor worships idols, has no illicit sexual relations, respects the laws concerning ritual purity, obeys Moses' law, refrains from robbery or violence, and is charitable. They are honoring God.

The Invitation - God gives out consequences according to the ways of each person. God is not up in heaven, deciding to bless someone based on previous family members' behavior. Nor is suffering placed on a person because of the actions of an earlier generation. It's essential for each person to repent and make things right with God. He is not a killjoy, wanting our lives to be miserable, fearing His big stick every time a law is violated. He takes no delight in the suffering of sinners. He wants none to perish, but rather for everyone to come into a right relationship with Him. That's the personal invitation God extends to everyone.