

9. The importance of individual righteousness ch. 18

18:1-4. At this point in Ezekiel's argument, the exiles were probably thinking: "What hope do we have? If we are reaping the result of our father's sins of the past and those of our present rulers, what can we do about it? This way of thinking already had begun to manifest itself in a proverb which was becoming famous: "The fathers eat the sour grapes, But the children's teeth are set on edge [blunt or dull]." (cf. Jer. 31:27-30). In other words, what the father does always affects his children. Here the exiles applied the concept of heredity specifically to the area of their sin and guilt. "Unrighteousness or righteousness are always **inherited**, "they declared (see vv. 1-2).¹

But God tells them to not use that proverb in Israel anymore because it is not true. God is the sovereign judge over every soul (person), each father and his son. And they need to understand that it is the person who sins that will die for his sin. It is not heritage or heredity that determines who will die. No one is condemned based on the sin of their father (cf. Ezekiel 3:16-21; 33:1-20). Alexander writes:

It is essential to the understanding of this passage that the concept of life and death according to the Mosaic covenant be clearly understood. Ezekiel declared in 18:4 that "the soul who sins will die." Yahweh was not talking about spiritual life and death in this passage, for the whole discussion of this book is seen in light of the Mosaic covenant. This covenant makes it very clear over and over again that the one who obeys will live physically, and the one who disobeys the covenant will die physically (cf. Lev. 26; Deut. 28:58-66; 30:15-20). It is within this context that life and death are understood in this chapter.

18:5-9. For instance, **a father** can be totally righteous by walking in God's law. All of the "statues and ordinances" mentioned here are listed in the Mosaic Law. In verse 9, God calls them "My statues and My ordinances." A life lived in such obedience displays a righteous man. God says of him, "...he will surely live."

18:10-13. That same man could have **a son** who is very violent, who sheds blood, eats at the pagan shrines in the mountains, oppresses the poor and needy, commits robbery, does not restore a pledge, and lifts up his eyes to idols and commits abomination, he lends money on interest and take increase. God asks the question, "Will he live?" His answer is **he will not live!** He will be put to death because he has committed all these abominations. And his blood will be on his own head. This is a figurative expression which means he is completely responsible for his own death or destruction.

18:14-18. God then goes to the next generation. If that son of that violent, evil man **has a son** [the grandson of the first man in vv. 5-9]. And although he has observed all his father's sin, he does not follow in his father's footsteps of sin and depravity. In other words, he does none of the sins his father did. **"He will not die, he shall surely live." But his father will die.**

¹ Alexander, *ibid.*, 61.

18:19-20. God then asks a question, “Why should the son not bear the punishment of the father’s iniquity?” The answer is “the son ... has practiced justice and righteousness and has observed all My (God’s) statutes and done them.” This is why he shall surely live. The point is **“the person who sins will die”** (see 18:4b). He continues, “..The son will not bear the punishment of the father’s iniquity, nor will the father bear the punishment for the son’s iniquity; the righteousness of the righteous will be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked will be upon himself.”

18:21-23. So that it is clear that there is a possibility of even the person who has walked in sin for a time to change his spiritual course and live, God says this: ²¹ **“But if the wicked man turns from [Hb. *sub* “to repent,”] all his sins which he has committed and observes all My [God’s] statutes and practices justice and righteousness, he shall surely live; he shall not die.** ²² All his transgressions which he has committed will not be remembered against him [forgiveness]; **because of his righteousness which he has practiced, he will live.”**

God then reveals something of His character in regard to how he deals with an individual and his sin through this rhetorical question. He states, ²³ “Do I have any pleasure in the death of the wicked,” declares the Lord God, “rather than that he should turn from his ways and live? Of course, the answer is obvious. **God finds pleasure in the repentant heart and in seeing a person turn from his sin and experience the abundant life He has for him.**

18:24-29. At the same time, the opposite of the above is true. If the righteous man turns from his righteousness, which is based on the Law, and sins by disobeying the Law, then he surely will die. His righteousness will not be remembered. The Lord’s ways are fair and equitable, but theirs are not. They condemn a person for the sin of his father and do not allow him to repent. God always allows for repentance.

18:30-32. Ezekiel summarized his argument in the final three verses of the chapter: Yahweh will judge each individual according to his own ways (cf. Deut. 24:26). In light of that fact, the Lord exhorted Israel to turn from her sins and obtain a new heart and a spirit and live (cf. a similar discussion is Ezek. 11:19; cf. 36:26; 2 Chron. 6:14, 36-42; Jer. 29:10-14; 31:33; 32:39). It was necessary for Israel to change her heart from hardheartedness (Ezek. 2:4; 3:7; 6:9) to a new heart, ultimately given by God in the new covenant (Jer. 31:33; Ezek. 36:26). It is interesting to note that God coupled His announcement of judgement, both personally and nationally, with an invitation to repent and live. “Why should Israel die? “ Grieved the Lord who does not want even one person to dies (18:d31; cf. v. 23). “turn and live!” declared Israel’s God.