

Ezekiel – Individual Responsibility

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In chapter eighteen of the Book of Ezekiel, God enters into a **disputation dialogue** with the people. This is one of the most profound chapters in the Bible. The people embraced a “worldly concept” – **transgenerational accountability**. **The Way of God is diametrically opposed to the worldly concept**. Individual responsibility requires repentance and conversion. (Ez18:19a,25a,19b-20,30b-32)

A Fallacious Proverb: The intent of the “proverb” is that **the current generation is not responsible** – it was the sin of previous generations that brought on the calamity (Ez18:1-4, Jr31:29-30). **The concept of transgenerational accountability was a widespread belief in the ancient world**. Some feel the Bible teaches it (Lam5:7, Ex20:4-5). In Exodus 20:5, “**visiting**” is from פָּקַד - paqad, a frequently used verb with a range of meaning including “visiting” in the sense of “**observing**” or “**taking notice**”; **but NOT “causing”**. The second commandment says that **the results of sin can be observed for generations**, but **God’s focus is repentance**: those who learn “to love” God and “keep the commandments” can break the cycle – this is also the sense in Lamentations (Dt24:16). Jesus’ disciples were clearly familiar with the concept (Jh9:1-3).

Some Terminology: “**Righteousness**” and “**Holiness**” are very closely related concepts – only God is truly righteous and holy (Jh17:1,11,25). **As human beings we cannot be “truly” “righteous” or “holy”** – we can only attain those attributes as resurrected members of the God family. But **the words also apply in degrees**, i.e., we can strive to be as God is, to attain his nature, to be “holy” and “righteous” – chapter eighteen uses the words in this way:

- פָּדָה - tzadeq, verb, “to be right”, “to be just”, “to be righteous”
- צַדִּיק - tzadeq, masculine noun, “that which right or normal”, “just”, “righteous”
- צַדִּיקָה - tz’daqah, feminine noun, same range of meaning as tzadeq
- צַדִּיק - tzadiq, adjective, “right”, “just”, “righteous”

In order for a human being to come into God’s presence, God must account the person to be in a state of “holiness”, a state of being “righteous”. That is **the role of “sacrifice” and “repentance”** (Old Covenant: animal sacrifice; New Covenant: propitiating sacrifice of Jesus Christ). To be in a “**state of righteousness**”, i.e., accounted righteous by God, **a person must be under God’s grace and living by the Way of God**. Persons who God considers to be in a “**state of wickedness**” have deliberately chosen to live according to the “**way of sin**”, their own way, idolatry (see diagram).

Generational Progression: God carefully lays out an elaborate “example” to demonstrate **individual responsibility from one generation to the next**. First generation: “If a man is righteous and does what is just and right ...” (Ez18:5-9). Second generation: “If he fathers a son who is violent, a shedder of blood, who does any of these things (though he himself did none of these things) ...” (Ez18:10-13). Third generation: “Now suppose this man fathers a son who sees all the sins that his father has done; he sees, and does not do likewise ...” (Ez18:14-18).

Righteousness, Wickedness, and Repentance: God elaborates, the **fallacy of the proverb** (Ez18:19-20); **repentance of the “wicked”** (Ez18:21-23); **reversion of the “righteous”** (Ez18:24). The “people” add another element to the disputation, “**The way of the Lord is not just**” (Ez18:25). YHWH explains why his way is just and the way of the people is not. **God is concerned with “the way” each person is going**: living by the “Way of God” allows God to grant life; living by one’s own way, can only lead to death (Ez18:26-29). God’s last word on the subject, as recorded by Ezekiel and as taught by him to the exiles, is to “**repent**” – this is a restatement of **the commission given to Ezekiel**: to bring to repentance those among the exiles who are being called by God (Ez18:30-32).

Lamentation for the Princes of Israel: Ezekiel ends his “Wisdom Section” with an **object lesson in individual responsibility**. Chapter nineteen is a “lamentation”, a parable, on the fate of the last kings of Israel all of whom were evil and rightly suffered for it. **Josiah was a “righteous” king: he represents the first generation in chapter eighteen**. Josiah had three sons, **Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, and Zedekiah**, all of whom became king and none of whom was righteous: **the second generation of chapter eighteen**. The parable draws heavily on the imagery from Jacob’s blessing: the lion and the vine (Gn49:9-11). The “**mother**” is the nation, a “**lioness**”; “**one of her cubs**” is Jehoahaz (Ez19:1-4, 2Kg23:30b,33,34b). Jehoiakim is “**another of her cubs**” (Ez19:5-8, 2Kg23:34a,35,37, 24:1-4, 2Chr36:8a). Jehoiachin, son of Jehoiakim, is “**brought to the king of Babylon**” (Ez19:9, 2Kg24:6,11-12, 25:27-30). The **metaphor changes to a “vine”**: the “mother” is “like a vine”, and like a “vine” deprived of “water”, i.e., nourishment from God, the vine withers away. The “**strong stems**” are the three previous kings (Ez19:10-11). Jehoiachin and the exiles were now “**planted in the wilderness**” of Babylon (Ez19:12-13). **Zedekiah** was not a fit or legitimate king, “**no strong stem, no scepter for ruling**”