

Why does God “punish” children?

The Ten Commandments contain this troublesome statement: “You shall not bow down to them (idols), or worship them; for I the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me,” (*Exodus* 20:5 NIV). Why would God punish innocent children? Isn't he always just and fair?

Difficult Bible passages must always be compared with others that address the same subject, but in plainer language. *Ezekiel* 18:20 clearly states: “The soul who sins is the one who will die. The son will not share the guilt of the father, nor will the father share the guilt of the son.” God doesn't blame children for their parents' evil deeds, or parents for their offsprings' errors. So why does *Exodus* 20:5 say that God punishes children for the fathers' idolatry?

Everyone who falls and breaks a bone knows the painful effects of gravity. Still, we understand the necessity of gravity's physical principles. Without gravity the earth wouldn't keep orbiting around the sun. Gravity also holds us to earth; without gravity, we would spin off as the earth rotates. We need gravity, but when we try to defy it, we often hurt others and ourselves.

Our creator loves us. His laws enable us to thrive. Because his commandments are essential to prolonged, happy human existence, disregarding God's moral laws creates the same effect as efforts to defy gravity. Disobedience brings harmful effects to the violators and to others. Expectant mothers who drink alcohol punish the fetuses in their wombs. Drug addicted parents produce addicted children. It often takes generations to undo the effects of verbal and physical abuse by parents.

Those who cry “foul” on God based on *Exodus* 20:5 miss what he promises in the next verse (20:6).



Our Lord “shows love to a thousand generations of those who love” him and keep his commandments. Our creator doesn't unduly punish children. But we too often do.