

## **Understanding The "Generational Curse" of Exodus 34:7**

**Is there such a thing as a "generational curse?" Exodus 34:7 says that God "visits the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children to the third and fourth generation." I find this disturbing, and not merely from a theoretical point of view. My family has some skeletons in its closet, and sometimes I think I see the sins of the past playing themselves out all over again in the present. What do you think the verse in Exodus means? Does God hold me responsible for something that someone else did?**

**As New Testament believers, we know that there is only one criterion God uses to judge the world and determine who is saved and not saved: faith in Jesus Christ. "He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life" (1 John 5:12). "For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God" (John 3:17, 18).**

**The Old Testament prophet Jeremiah anticipated this New Testament perspective. Writing about 600 years before the birth of Christ, he declared in no uncertain terms that God does not "hold you responsible for something that someone else did." Ultimately, says Jeremiah, you are answerable for your actions: "In those days they shall say no more: 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.' But every one shall die for his iniquity: every man who eats the sour grapes, his teeth shall be set on edge" (Jeremiah 31:29, 30; see also Ezekiel 18:2, 3).**

**Every individual, then, is responsible for his or her own choices. And in the end, the only choice that counts is the one you make in response to this question: "What then shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" (Matthew 27:22). If you end up spending eternity separated from God in "outer darkness" (see Matthew 8:12, 13:42), it won't be because of the "skeletons" in your family closet. It will be the direct result of your failure to embrace the gift of God's forgiveness and grace made available in the Person of Jesus Christ (John 1:17, 3:16). On the other hand, if you dwell forever in the presence of angels and fellowship with the Heavenly Father, it won't be because you somehow managed, utilizing your wisdom and virtue, to avoid the mistakes made by previous generations. It will be because you accepted God's merciful offer of unmerited deliverance and salvation. No one—not your parents, your grandparents, your aunts, uncles, spouse, children, grandchildren, or friends—can make that decision for you. You alone are capable of making it.**

**What, then, did the Lord have in mind when He told Moses that He is a God who "visits the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation"? We'd suggest that there are a couple of different ways to answer this question. The first is theological. The second is practical.**

**Let's begin by taking a look at the theological side of the issue. How does the Old Testament doctrine of the "generational curse" fit in with the New**

**Testament teaching that salvation is individual, and that even the worst offender in a long line of sinners can be saved simply by turning to Christ? It seems to us that Paul provides the answer in Romans 5, 6, and 7. In these chapters, the apostle argues that, from an important point of view, human sin and death are corporate rather than individual problems. He tells us that "by one man's disobedience [i.e., Adam's] many were made sinners" (Romans 5:18) and that "through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin" (Romans 5:12). This is why each one of us remains a "slave of sin," unable to please God with our actions until we are "set free" by the redemptive work of Jesus Christ (Romans 6:20, 22).**

**This, then, is what the "generational curse" is all about. Your family tree stretches back much farther than you can imagine. The "skeletons" in your closet weren't put there by your dad or your grandmother or your great-aunt. They're the work of your First Parents. You were in Adam when he transgressed God's commandment. You were condemned with him. But that's not the end of the story. The good news is that redemption and eternal life are also corporate rather than individual. Just as you were in Adam when he fell from grace, so now, if you believe in Jesus, you are in Christ through faith. This is what Paul means when he says that "by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous" (Romans 5:19). There's just one way to get out from under the "generational curse:" you have to be grafted into a whole new family tree (Romans 11:11-24).**

**But we said that it's possible to view this issue from another perspective-the practical angle. If we set theology aside for a moment and apply common sense, it tells us that behavioral and attitudinal problems, like height, weight, hair color, and complexion, tend to run in families. In other words, an inclination toward certain types of sin can be passed on from generation to generation like any other human trait. This is particularly true of various kinds of addictive behavior-alcoholism, for instance. Similarly, it's easy to see how physical and sexual abuse might become ingrained in the psychological "legacy" of certain families. But none of this should be viewed in terms of an irreversible "curse." As we've already pointed out, spiritual deliverance is available to everyone who sincerely calls upon the name of the Lord (Romans 10:13), and there are many sources of professional assistance-pastors, therapists, counselors, and physicians-for those who need practical help.**