

Ezekiel: Street Preacher to the Exiles

D'Marco is a Christian. He's just going through a phase now," said Gerrika. She and her pastor's wife, Ladona, were driving to the county jail to bail out her 19-year-old son. D'Marco had been arrested for driving while intoxicated.

"I think they've lowered the legal alcohol limit anyway," Gerrika told Ladona. "I mean, a person can't take a little sip of alcohol these days."

Ladona had seen D'Marco only a few times since Gerrika start attending their church five years ago. Ladona had heard a little about D'Marco's various problems from his mother mentioning them as prayer requests at women's meetings.

"He's a teenager, doing what teenagers do," Gerrika had told the group of women.

"Gerrika," Ladona said from the passenger seat of the car, "is D'Marco a Christian?"

"Oh goodness, yes," Gerrika said. "I drug him to the altar and made him repeat the sinner's prayer when he was 13, and I made him get baptized. I told him if I'm going to heaven, then he is too!"

Gerrika said quietly, "I had to do that. He's all I got."

"Gerrika," Ladona said softly. "D'Marco belongs to the Lord first. D'Marco has to choose God for himself. He has to be responsible for himself and his own sins. You cannot try to cover your son's sins. Only the blood of Jesus can do that."

1. *When do you want to take responsibility for what you do?*

2. *When do you not want to take responsibility?*

3. *Why do we need to take responsibility for all our actions?*

A False Proverb Refuted

Ezekiel 18:1-4, KJV

1 The word of the LORD came unto me again, saying,

2 What mean ye, that ye 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, saith the Lord GOD, ye shall not have occasion any more to use this proverb in Israel.

4 Behold, all souls are mine; as the soul of the father, so also the soul of the son is mine: the soul that sinneth, it shall die.

Ezekiel 18:1-4, NIV

¹The word of the LORD came to me: ²"What do you people mean by quoting this proverb about the land of Israel:

" 'The parents eat sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge'?

³"As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, you will no longer quote this proverb in Israel. ⁴For everyone belongs to me, the parent as well as the child—both alike belong to me. The one who sins is the one who will die."

In Ezekiel 18:1-4, we learn about a popular, yet false, saying that was circulating among the Jews in Jerusalem and Babylon. The "proverb" (vs. 2), which seems to be based on a misunderstanding of Exodus 20:5 and Numbers 14:18, meant that because of the sins of previous generations, the present generation was suffering. According to this logic, one generation could blame their troubles on the sins of previous generations. Even more distressing, it meant that God was punishing their generation for the sins their ancestors had committed.

The phrase "as surely as I live" (Ezek. 18:3) indicates that the Lord was making a solemn oath. Since there was no one greater than Him, He swore by His own life when He revealed His will. It was His desire that the Jews no longer use the proverb about intergenerational responsibility, for it represented the wrong view of how He executed justice. God does not punish the innocent for the sins of the guilty.

Furthermore, God was offended by His people hiding behind this lie. So, He declared that this widespread proverb would no longer be repeated. In verse 4, God announced

that every person belonged to Him, including the parent and the child. As Creator, it was His unchanging will that guilt would not be transferred from one generation to the next. Only the person who sinned would die for his or her sins.

4. *What was objectionable about the popular proverb the Lord censured?*

5. *How did God refute the false proverb?*

A Righteous Person Commended

Ezekiel 18:5-9, KJV

5 But if a man be just, and do that which is lawful and right,

6 And hath not eaten upon the mountains, neither hath lifted up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, neither hath defiled his neighbour's wife, neither hath come near to a menstruous woman,

7 And hath not oppressed any, but hath restored to the debtor his pledge, hath spoiled none by violence, hath given his bread to the hungry, and hath covered the naked with a garment;

8 He that hath not given forth upon usury, neither hath taken any increase, that hath withdrawn his hand from iniquity, hath executed true judgment between man and man,

9 Hath walked in my statutes, and hath kept my

Ezekiel 18:5-9, NIV

⁵“Suppose there is a righteous man who does what is just and right.

⁶He does not eat at the mountain shrines

or look to the idols of Israel.

He does not defile his neighbor's wife

or have sexual relations with a woman during her period.

⁷He does not oppress anyone, but returns what he took in pledge for a loan.

He does not commit robbery but gives his food to the hungry and provides clothing for the naked.

⁸He does not lend to them at interest

or take a profit from them.

He withholds his hand from doing wrong

and judges fairly between two parties.

⁹He follows my decrees

and faithfully keeps my laws.

That man is righteous;

KJV

judgments, to deal truly; he is just, he shall surely live, saith the Lord God.

NIV

he will surely live,
declares the Sovereign LORD."

The overriding truth in Ezekiel 18 is that people are held responsible for their own sin, and that guilt is not transferred across generations. To illustrate this fact, God presented three hypothetical situations. He talked about a man (vss. 5-9), his son (vss. 10-13), and the man's grandson (vss. 14-18).

The first example concerned a virtuous person who lived justly and righteously and was fully obedient to God's law. The individual did not engage in idolatry or pagan practices of any kind. Moreover, he was faithful to the laws governing relationships with other Israelites. For example, he maintained sexual purity (see Exod. 20:14; Lev. 18:19).

Ezekiel described the righteous man as a person who refused to oppress anyone. For instance, he would not keep as collateral for a loan any item the borrower might require such as a cloak needed for warmth at night. He would never steal from anyone. Rather, he gave food and clothing to the poor.

This Israelite cared more about giving to others than receiving anything for himself (Ezek. 18:7). For example, in financial matters, if the upright person made a loan to anyone, his dealings were fair. He did not charge an excessive amount of interest on any loans he made. The phrase "take a profit" (vs. 8) refers to exploiting the poor to amass a fortune.

The devout Israelite tried to do what was right and fair in every situation by observing God's statutes and regulations. This person's outward actions revealed an inner moral character that was rooted in obedience to the covenant. In keeping with a life based on God's grace, the righteous person would not suffer judgment for the sins committed by others.

6. *How does Ezekiel 18:5 describe righteousness?*

7. *What sins does Ezekiel 18:6 spotlight?*

8. *What would the righteous man not do according to Ezekiel 18:7-8?*

Get a New Heart and a New Spirit

Ezekiel 18:30-32, KJV

30 Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways, saith the Lord GOD. Repent, and turn yourselves from all your transgressions; so iniquity shall not be your ruin.

31 Cast away from you all your transgressions, whereby ye have transgressed; and make you a new heart and a new spirit: for why will ye die, O house of Israel?

32 For I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth, saith the Lord GOD: wherefore turn yourselves, and live ye.

Ezekiel 18:30-32, NIV

³⁰“Therefore, you Israelites, I will judge each of you according to your own ways, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. ³¹Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, people of Israel? ³²For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent and live!”

The Israelite response to God’s judgment was to accuse Him of being unjust. God, in response, declared that it was Israel’s ways that were unjust—not His (Ezek. 18:25). Indeed, verse 30 says that God judged the Israelites for their own sins, not the ones committed by previous generations. Also, only the Israelites who were obedient to God and repented of their sins could expect to escape His judgment ahead.

So, the only hope of avoiding calamity was for the people to repent of their sins so they would not be dragged down and ruined by them. The Lord questioned whether His people really wanted to be put to death for their sins. After all, He does not delight in condemning a person (vss. 23, 32).

So, He urged them to allow the Holy Spirit to bring about an inner renewal among them. Only the Spirit can give each person “a new heart and a new spirit” (vs. 31). Each person would be responsible for making the life or death decision to follow God’s ways and to live or die in unrepentant sin.

9. What incentive did the Israelites have to repent (Ezek. 18:30)?

Stand on Your Own Two Legs

An episode of TV's classic *The Andy Griffith Show* features Andy's son Opie telling his father that somehow a baseball had gone through a lady's window, and asked would his father be upset if Opie said it was his fault? Andy said no, he would not be upset—provided Opie would not be upset if his father took a part of his son's allowance every week until the window was paid for.

At that same time, Andy had a young man in his jail awaiting trial who had recklessly driven a local man in his truck off the road. The young man asked the sheriff, "Why didn't you bail the kid out? It wasn't much money." Andy replied that he could have, but at some other time Opie would have wanted his father to bail him out in more serious situations. He would not learn to "stand on his own two legs" if he didn't take responsibility for his actions at his young age.

Later, an attorney arrived from the young man's father to get the young man out of paying for his mistake. At the short trial, the lawyer got the man driving the truck to accept blame for the accident instead. Andy was ready to dismiss the case when the young man admitted he had indeed driven the man off the road. He was responsible for the accident. When the lawyer asked the young man why he was taking the blame when he didn't have to, Andy replied, "I think he's saying he wants to stand on his own two legs."

Someone has said, "God sees our actions, not our excuses." The Israelites blamed everyone but themselves for their situation, so Ezekiel told them, God judges each of us individually for what we have done. We all need to stand on our own two legs and admit that we are not perfect, we do sinful things all the time, and we need a merciful God to forgive us.

10. *When did you learn to "stand on your own two legs"?*

11. *Why would we think God believes our excuses?*

12. *How do you become someone who always takes responsibility for their actions?*

Own It

The lesson today might have brought something to mind you need to go and make right. Perhaps you need to tell someone you're sorry for something you did but had denied, or you need to take responsibility for something you have hedged about until now. What we own tells us a lot about our character, integrity, and humility before others and before God.

► *This week, commit to doing something to help replace "It's not my fault" with "I did it. I own it." Write here what you will do.*

KEY VERSE

Behold, all souls are mine; as the soul of the father, so also the soul of the son is mine: the soul that sinneth, it shall die.

—Ezekiel 18:4, KJV

"For everyone belongs to me, the parent as well as the child—both alike belong to me. The one who sins is the one who will die."

—Ezekiel 18:4, NIV

DAILY BIBLE READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK'S LESSON

Week of May 24 through May 30

(See *The Quiet Hour* and *Cross* devotionals on these passages.)

- Mon.** Matthew 12:38-42—Jonah's Experience Foreshadows Christ's.
- Tues.** Luke 11:29-32—Nineveh's Repentance: A Lasting Message.
- Wed.** Jonah 1:1-12—Jonah Turns Away from God's Call.
- Thurs.** Jonah 1:13-16—Sailors Make Vows to the Lord.
- Fri.** Jonah 4:1-5—Jonah Resents God's Grace toward Others.
- Sat.** Jonah 4:6-11—God's Compassion Overrides Jonah's Personal Comfort.
- Sun.** Jonah 3—God's Mercy Prevails.