

# Bite Size Bible Study

Sins of The Fathers #104

By Pastor Lee

Ancient tribal peoples like the Israelites, tended to see their identity as being a part of a family, clan or tribe. They lived in a collectivist culture rather than an individualist culture as we do. If you had asked one of these ancient men to tell you about himself, he would have told you about his family or clan. He would speak of the traits of the clan and whether his family were farmers, warriors, or musicians. He would tell stories about his brave ancestors with great pride, believing that those were a part of his own identity. He would tell of how his family would work together in making a living for all the family; and how they prospered or suffered together. He would tell of the great difficulty in surviving in those days and only working together could they survive.

In those days, it was understood that the fate of the person was inextricably tied to the fate of the whole group, and that if one sinned, especially the leader, they would all bear guilt and suffer misfortune for it. They would have seen it in the same way that if one hand were wounded, the whole person suffers, not just the hand. To us it doesn't seem at all just, but to their logic, it seemed reasonable. In some places in the Old Testament, God seems to be saying this as well:

*You shall not bow down to them 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, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments. (Ex. 20:5-6)*

These two verses are understandably problematic for us because we live in an individualist culture and don't see ourselves as yoked to any particular group. If the group fails we may still survive.

In Ezekiel 18 we hear the same thinking about ancestral guilt from the people of Judah in the form of a proverb that they used to quote:

*'The fathers eat the sour grapes, but the children's teeth are set on edge' (Ezek. 18:2)*

This was their response to the suffering of the nation before they are forced to go to exile in Babylon. This was understood to be the result of their parent's sins and the punishment due for those sins. They assumed that they were innocent personally of wrongdoing. While this let them avoid remorse for sin, it also gave them a sense of hopelessness.

Whether they repented or not, they would still suffer for the sins that their families had committed before them.

God strenuously disagrees with punishing children for the sins of their parents. Much of Ezekiel 18 is written to make the point that God judges the individual on his own terms, not in terms of the actions of his ancestors. God sees that each person is accountable before Him

*If a righteous man turns from his righteousness and commits sin, he will die for it; because of the sin he has committed he will die. But if a wicked man turns away from the wickedness he has committed and does what is just and right, he will save his life. Because he considers all the offenses he has committed and turns away from them, he will surely live; he will not die. Yet the house of Israel says, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' Are my ways unjust, O house of Israel? Is it not your ways that are unjust? (Ezek. 18:25 - 29)*

God offers them a wonderful message of hope, if they will recognize their own sin and repent from it.

*Therefore, O house of Israel, I will judge you, each one according to his ways, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent and live! (Ezek 18:30-32)*

Then how should we interpret Exodus 20:5-6 in the light of Ezekiel 18?

The picture of several generations being condemned for a sin may be describing the generational pattern of sin that occurs in families. A father, who abuses his wife, often has sons who are wife-abusers, just as is true with alcoholism and other vices. Parents do teach and reinforce patterns of sins (or righteousness) to their children, which often goes on for generations. Under this pattern the children aren't being punished for their parent's guilt, but are carrying on the sins the family has taught them. Ezekiel tells us that the consequences of sin only extend to the generations that keep on in the sin of the ancestors.

**If the children repent and change their ways,  
God's desire is that all will repent and live!**

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