

# PREACHING TO THE EXILES

DEVOTIONAL READING: Psalm 147

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Ezekiel 18

TODAY'S SCRIPTURE: Ezekiel 18:1-9, 30-32

## I. A Proverb

### Ezekiel 18:1-4

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.

1. *The word of the Lord* is a common phrase used in Ezekiel to emphasize that the Lord spoke to His prophet. God communicated with His people even in exile. His continuing to speak to Ezekiel was meant in part to reassure the people that God was still with them in a foreign land.

2. As the exiles wallowed in the misery of their situation, they tried to come to grips with the reason for it. In so doing, they landed on a *proverb*.

The Targum, a first-century AD Aramaic paraphrase of the Hebrew Bible, gives the meaning of the proverb: "The fathers sin, the children suffer." Therefore, *The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge*

expresses the belief that those in exile (the children) are unjustly bearing the punishment for the sins of earlier generations (the parents). The exiles denied responsibility on their part.

The proverb has some truth to it in that the sins of one generation can have lasting effects on the next. Ezekiel himself pointed out that the exile was the result of covenant unfaithfulness by many generations of Israelites (Ezekiel 16). The exiles' ancestors were indeed guilty. But this generation had been expelled from the promised land because of their own sin.

3. The problem in today's text is that the exiles specifically apply their *proverb* to disavow any culpability for their situation. In so doing, they can claim that God is unjust in His dealings with them (Ezekiel 18:25-29; 33:17-20).

4. Everyone belongs to God since He is the sovereign Creator. His justice was not and is not limited by national borders. He has the right to declare that *the soul that sinneth, it shall die*. Each person is responsible to God for his or her own sin, and God will deal with each person individually.

This principle applied to how God dealt with His exiled people. His judgments are fair and true. It was pointless for the exiles to insist on their innocence.

## II. A Case Study

### Ezekiel 18:5-9

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

5. This verse sets up a case study. For the hypothetical *man* introduced here to be *just* is another, parallel way of saying that he does *that which is lawful and right*.

6a. Eating *upon the mountains* refers to participation in idolatrous practices. High places featured altars, often dedicated to the worship of Canaanite deities. To look *to the idols of Israel* was to worship and seek help from false gods or to make an image of the true God for worship.

Proper love for God begins with worshipping no other gods (compare Exodus 20:3-6).

The exiles were far from the high places of their fathers' idols. But the exiles were surrounded by the countless deities of the Babylonians. The temptation of straying to other gods remained real, especially when they considered their uncertainty regarding God's continuing care.

6b. The just man also was careful to stay morally pure. The Law of Moses prohibited not only adultery (Exodus 20:14) but also intercourse during a woman's menstrual period (Leviticus 15:19-33; 18:19). The penalty for violation of the latter was that "both of them shall be cut off from among their people" (20:18). Some suggest that the reason for this restriction was because of the special role of blood in atoning for sins, respecting certain rights of women, or to maintain ceremonial purity.

7. The righteous man also exhibits godly love toward others. Righteousness consists of more than merely doing no harm. A righteous person uses his or her resources to provide for the material needs of others (James 2:15-16). The examples in this verse are all forms of economic righteousness shown to *the debtor* and *the hungry* and *the naked*. These are representative of other needy neighbors as well.

The righteous man never lies about or wrongs a neighbor for any reason. Rather, he keeps his distance from evil and all forms of judicial corruption. Such a man puts God's law above any opportunity to gain at the expense of another.

8. The economically vulnerable often found themselves (and still do today) in positions where they had no choice but to accept the terms of predatory lenders. God viewed the practice as evidence that His people had forgotten Him (Ezekiel 22:12). He is the protector of the downtrodden, and He expected His people to be the same.

While the wicked people took advantage of the poor in various ways, the righteous person in Israel did not charge interest on loans (*usury*) to fellow Israelites. And while interest could be charged to a foreigner, it still had to be restrained (Deuteronomy 23:19-20).

9a. *Hath walked* is another way of saying *hath kept*. Likewise, God's *statutes* are the same as His *judgments*. Comprehensively,

the righteous person does not follow the selfish, sinful ways of others in any respect.

9b. God will not judge or punish the *just* person for the sins of others. We may note in passing that the capitalization of the phrase *the Lord GOD* indicates different Hebrew words than does the capitalization of the phrase “the LORD . . . God” as the latter occurs in, for example, Ezekiel 20:5b. There are three single-word Hebrew names for God in the Old Testament: Yahweh, Adonai, and Elohim. The phrases “the Lord GOD” and “the LORD . . . God” indicate different combinations of these names.

### III. A Call

#### Ezekiel 18:30-32

**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.**

30-31a. What follows recalls Solomon’s prayer that God would forgive the people of their sins and heal their land when they repented. Israel’s sense of national connectedness had diminished following the division into two kingdoms after Solomon’s death. A sense of moral responsibility for the sins of the community followed. However, the Scriptures insist that both guilt and salvation have a corporate aspect. Sinful characteristics are transmitted from generation to generation. But God affirmed that He would also judge each person individually, according to his or her walk before God.

God said that He would judge the *house of Israel* [collective singular, corporate aspect], *every one of you according to his ways* [personal singular]. Although each person was responsible for his or her own guilt before the Lord, individual decisions affected the community as a whole. The collective singular *house of* shows that the covenant God had with Israel was corporate; it included the whole of Israel. The singular *every one of you* shows that the overall moral tone of the community was formed on the collective choices of individuals. The Israelites were to look not at the conduct of their ancestors but to their own. They were to rid themselves of any and all personal sin. God would be gracious and forgive all who turned to Him in repentance.

31b. Those in the generation experiencing exile were worthy of the judgment that also could have fallen on the prior generation. God was equally clear that condemnation wasn’t inevitable. He defined repentance as the rejection of one’s past sinful ways, and He appealed to the *house of Israel* to accept *a new heart and a new spirit*.

*Why will ye die?* meant that the sentence of death was not inevitable. God extended an offer of forgiveness through repentance. Each individual had the freedom to choose life or death. People are capable of knowing right from wrong, and God deals with us on that basis. The blame for one’s sin and judgment cannot be shifted to God, Satan, nature, nurture, parents, or circumstances.

32. God takes *no pleasure* in the destruction of His creation. He wants to deliver people from their unfaithfulness and *the death* it brings. He judges. He also provides people with the means of salvation. God issues an invitation to repent and live. He demonstrates love by His willingness to set people free from their sinful past and the punishment they deserve. He demonstrates His holiness by not allowing sin to continue.

# INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

## PREACHING TO THE EXILES

### Into the Lesson

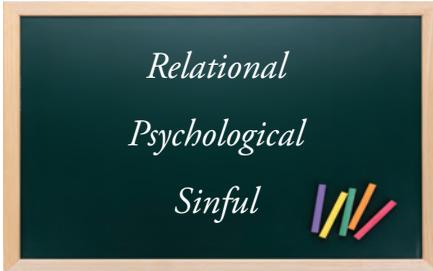
Discuss and list what problems parents of any generation likely to pass on to their children.

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### Into the Word

Read Ezekiel 18:2 and Jeremiah 31:29.



Realizing that God condemns this saying, how does it support and how is it different from the experiences we shared in our opening discussion?

Make a list of possibilities implied by this starter: *How to know if a person is just and right.*

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Note how this list of behaviors is repeated in verses 10-13 and 15-17. Read verses 30-32 and summarize in one sentence the truth expressed there.

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### Into Life

Discuss one of the following scenarios:

I was ashamed to go to church my whole life because everyone knew about my father's problems. They knew about the bills he didn't pay. They knew about the money he'd embezzled. They'd heard the rumors about his secret girlfriends. They'd suspected that his "business trips" were really just covers for drinking, gambling, and womanizing. I was deeply humiliated. His reputation splashed onto me, and I felt sure that people were talking about my family behind my back whenever I showed up at church.

Growing up, I attended church several times a week. My dad was an elder. My mom was a member of the missions committee. We had visiting guest speakers in our home, and we spent summer vacations at a Christian camp. As soon as I could get away from all this churchiness, I did. Now that I'm older, I can see why religion was important to my folks, but that doesn't mean I have time for it. I want something different than what my parents had. And besides, I was baptized when I was 10. I figure that all those hours I spent in church activities pretty well seals my future with God.

1. When are you most susceptible to blaming your upbringing for your current behavior?
2. When are you most tempted to believe that your "family faith" is good enough in God's eyes?
3. How do you solve these two problems?

### THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

**If we cannot acknowledge God's judgment, we will see no need to receive His forgiveness.**