

## Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32

The word of the LORD came to me.

<sup>2</sup>What do you mean, you who keep repeating this proverb concerning the soil of Israel, “Fathers eat sour grapes, and their sons’ teeth are set on edge”? <sup>3</sup>As surely as I live, declares the LORD God, you will never again use this proverb in Israel. <sup>4</sup>Indeed, all souls are mine. The soul of the father is mine just like the soul of the son. The soul who sins is the one who will die.

<sup>25</sup>But you say, “The LORD’s way is not fair.” Listen now, house of Israel. Is it my way that is not fair? Is it not your ways that are not fair? <sup>26</sup>If a righteous man turns away from his righteousness and practices unrighteousness, he will die because of it. Because of the unrighteousness that he has practiced, he will die.

<sup>27</sup>But if a wicked man turns from his wickedness that he has done and practices justice and righteousness, he will preserve his life. <sup>28</sup>Because he has seen and turned away from all the rebellious acts that he had committed, he will surely live, and he will not die. <sup>29</sup>But the house of Israel says, “The LORD’s way is not fair.” Is it really my ways that are not fair, O house of Israel? Is it not your ways that are not fair?

<sup>30</sup>Therefore, I will judge each one of you according to his ways, O house of Israel, declares the LORD God. Repent and turn away from all your rebellious acts, so that you will not set out a stumbling block that makes you guilty. <sup>31</sup>Throw off from yourselves all your rebellious actions by which you have rebelled, and obtain a new heart and a new spirit for yourselves. Why should you die, O house of Israel? <sup>32</sup>For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies, declares the LORD God. So repent and live!

## Is God Fair?

### I.

His name was Manasseh. Not the Manasseh who was Joseph’s son—not the one from whom the tribe of Israel called “Manasseh” got it’s name. This was another Manasseh many, many generations later. This Manasseh was a king of Judah.

“[King Manasseh] did evil in the eyes of the LORD, following the disgusting practices of the nations which the LORD had driven out before the people of Israel” (2 Kings 21:2, EHV). You can read for yourself the rest of his disgusting story in 2 Kings 21. Among the worst of the low-lights of his story is this: “Because Manasseh king of Judah has engaged in these disgusting practices and has done more evil than all that which the Amorites who had gone before him had done, and he has caused Judah to sin with his filthy idols” (2 Kings 21:11, EHV). God is pretty descriptive when he inspires his writers to record his Word. The Word the writer of 2 Kings uses for “filthy idols” could have a more graphic translation; the EHV sometimes has a footnote for this word indicating it’s other meaning: manure idols. King Manasseh had led his people down the destructive path of worshiping manure gods. It was despicable; what Manasseh had done was disgusting.

*That* history was some 40 years before Ezekiel was writing these verses before us today. The people of Ezekiel’s day were in exile. They looked back in their history books at King Manasseh and the exile brought about by his actions against God and whined: “Fathers eat sour grapes, and their sons’ teeth are set on edge” (Ezekiel 18:2, EHV). What they were saying was: “It’s not fair. *God’s* not fair! This is all Manasseh’s fault; *he* started it!” Pointing to their parents and grandparents they came to the conclusion that *they* carried a lot less guilt than their ancestors. *Their* behavior was much better. So they thought.

Finger-pointing has been the name of the game from Adam and Eve onward. Every human being likes to find someone else to blame for whatever seems to be going wrong.

“As surely as I live, declares the LORD God, you will never again use this proverb in Israel. <sup>4</sup>Indeed, all souls are mine. The soul of the father is mine just like the soul of the son. The soul who sins is the one who will die” (Ezekiel 18:3-4, EHV). Pointing back at past generations was *not* helpful. God doesn’t judge people based on the sins of previous generations. God was poignantly identifying the *real* problem: *that* generation was repeating the same mistakes—the same sins—as the previous generations they were trying to blame for all their problems.

Some translations use people or individuals instead of using the word soul. While it’s not an incorrect translation, in the context it might miss some nuance. The death that sin brings to the person is death of the *soul*, not just the body. Sin brings about a *spiritual* death that means a separation from God. The prospect of being cut off from God forever is designed to bring a healthy dose of fear to anyone.

## II.

“It’s not fair!” Finger-pointing continues. It wasn’t just Adam and Eve who found places to point a finger of blame; it wasn’t just the people of Ezekiel’s generation. People today do exactly the same thing.

“Fathers eat sour grapes, and their sons’ teeth are set on edge” (Ezekiel 18:2, EHV). Maybe we could update the proverb a little bit for today: “Children suffer the consequences of what their parents have done.” Satan is just fine with you thinking this way. The concept is that people are doomed to live in the same kind of situation they grew up in, even if it is deplorable. He wants you to believe you are a helpless victim.

“God’s not fair!” Is it true?

“But you say, ‘The LORD’s way is not fair.’ Listen now, house of Israel. Is it my way that is not fair? Is it not your ways that are not fair?” (Ezekiel 18:25, EHV).

When we read the text you will have noticed a break in the verses. We skipped from verse 4 to verse 25. In between there was an illustration of three generations and how they are treated by God.

The first generation details a believer. He did not bow down to the manure gods or do all kinds of other detestable things in the eyes of the Lord. “If he walks in my statutes and keeps my ordinances by acting faithfully, that man is righteous and he will surely live, declares the LORD God” (Ezekiel 18:9, EHV).

That man’s son was the polar opposite. He did all kinds of detestable things, including bowing down to the manure gods. He exploited the poor and needy, stole things, raped his neighbor’s wife, and even killed people. “Will he live? He will not live! He committed all these abominations, so he will surely be put to death. His blood will be upon him” (Ezekiel 18:13, EHV). This individual’s upbringing by good and righteous parents could not save him. His own evil actions that he committed were evidence of the unbelief in which his soul would die.

*That* man’s son was repulsed by the evil of his father. He turned away from his father’s evil actions and the manure gods his father followed. He turned back to the true God. “But you ask, ‘Why doesn’t the son share in the guilt of the father?’ Because the son did what was just and right. He kept all my statutes and carried them out, so he will surely live. <sup>20</sup>The soul who sins is the one who will die” (Ezekiel 18:19-20, EHV).

Rags to riches stories are intriguing. A person has broken the cycle of poverty or education or some other limiting factor and has risen above all adversity to make something of him- or herself. Though it wasn’t a long cycle, the third generation in this example broke the cycle of

his godless father.

The whole illustration shows us that God deals with individuals.

The problem is, when we are honest with ourselves, “the soul who sins” points the finger of blame squarely at each one of us. Is it even possible to break the cycle?

Maybe you don’t worship Baal or Asherah, as did so many Old Testament Israelites. But if you are honest, you know that you have all kinds of manure gods. Not literal manure, but all that stuff and all those activities you find so much more important than God.

“Fathers eat sour grapes, and their sons’ teeth are set on edge” (Ezekiel 18:2, EHV). “Children suffer the consequences of what their parents have done.” The past haunts us. Every one of us was born with the sins of our parents. Every one of us has perpetuated sin and kept it going. Every one of us should have a healthy dose of fear. “The soul who sins is the one who will die” (Ezekiel 18:4, EHV). The consequences of sin are eternal death. We know it. Satan wants us to think that we are helpless victims, caught in an endless cycle.

### III.

“I take no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies, declares the LORD God. So repent and live!” (Ezekiel 18:32, EHV). Any time you see the name the “LORD” in all capitals or small capitals in your English Bible you are seeing God’s proper name. This is the special name by which he established his covenant with Moses and the People of Israel. This is the name used of the faithful God who promised a Savior to his people—to *all* people.

This is the *real* rags to riches story. The filthy rags of our own unrighteousness have been cleaned in the blood of God’s Son, who died on the cross to pay for all our sins of following the manure gods of this present age. God has brought us salvation in Christ Jesus.

“Repent and turn away from all your rebellious acts, so that you will not set out a stumbling block that makes you guilty. <sup>31</sup>Throw off from yourselves all your rebellious actions by which you have rebelled, and obtain a new heart and a new spirit for yourselves” (Ezekiel 18:30-31, EHV).

There is a double turning that accompanies repentance. Turn away from the sin that offends God; turn away from that kind of sin that creates a stumbling block that keeps leading you down the same destructive path again and again. Then turn *to* the Savior-God, the God who took away your rags and gave you riches in Christ Jesus. The Savior-God is the One who gives grace and mercy. He will *give* you the faith you need to obtain a new heart and a new spirit for yourselves.

### IV.

“Repent and live!” (Ezekiel 18:32, EHV).

Is God fair? While he calls to repentance, he is the One who has given his sure promises to you that you will not die, but live. He is the One who has taken away your rags and given you riches. He is the One who gives the new heart and the new spirit to you in which you live as a child of God.

God is more than fair. What we deserved—what every soul deserves—is death—eternal separation from God. But that God is our Savior-God. What he gave us is life; not just a life of getting by, but the eternal life we look forward to.

Live as one who looks forward. Live as one who relies on the guidance God gives you. Live as one who trusts in the forgiveness he promised you and has already given you. Live as one who rejoices in a new heart and a new spirit.

God bless your life of faith in him. Amen.