

Generational Sin

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Today we heard readings from the *Torah parashah* called *Ki Tissa*, and we heard a *d'rash* on Exodus 34:5-7. I want to read those verses to you again, and then discuss them from a somewhat different point of view:

"Now the LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. And the LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation."

The Scripture says that the Lord God is merciful. We like to hear that because there are times we know we need His mercy. It says that He is gracious. We like to hear that too, because it comforts us to know that we receive blessings from Him though we are not deserving. It says that God is longsuffering. That's really good to know because if He weren't, He would have destroyed us long ago on account of our sin. The Scriptures also tell us that God is abounding in goodness and truth. That's really good also because He's our moral compass. Without God, there would be no way to know right from wrong. As a matter of fact, without God's virtue there would be no distinction between right and wrong. Murdering someone – not murdering someone – it would be all the same. Just an act. Forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin. Even before Yeshua came to die for our sins, God had a plan for forgiving sin that was certainly accomplished through Yeshua because He was there at the beginning and has been at the right hand of the Father all through history. And the Lord God is just, for we see from this Scripture that He doesn't disregard the sins of the guilty. But then comes the hard saying in verse 7 of the Exodus passage:

"...visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation."

This saying seems hard indeed, and to Americans like us who are accustomed to being affected by our own conduct rather than by our parents' conduct, it even seems unfair! But let's not go there because our American ways are not God's ways and, so far as I know, God has not applied for a Green Card.

But why would God say such a thing? I want to know, because I love my children and my grand children, and don't want anything bad to happen to them. Can it be that because of my sin, past, present and yes, even future, that my children are cursed? That the die has been cast and they are doomed to punishment for what I have done? I have heard it taught that way, but I will show you, through Scripture, that it is not so.

Let's explore this some. First, the Hebrew words in verse 7 translated in the New King James Version as "*visiting the iniquity of,*" are *pokeid avon*. PAY ATTENTION NOW, because you

are about to see a good example of why we ought not to accept English translations of Scripture on their face without scrutinizing them.

The King James and New King James Versions translate the Hebrew words *pokeid avon* as “visiting the iniquity of.” The NIV translates them “he punishes,” and Stern’s Complete Jewish Bible translates them “but causing the negative effects of.” Notice that they are all different. The NIV and Stern translations attribute a punitive or negative meaning to the words, while the King James and New King James give it a meaning that is more neutral. By neutral, I mean that “visiting something on someone” merely means that you are causing a person to encounter it. It is not necessarily negative.

Looking now at the word *avon*, it is translated “iniquity” in the King James and New King James, “offenses” in Stern’s translation, and “sin” in the NIV.

All three are different so, as a believer who wants to understand what is being said and one who is not a Hebrew scholar, I will have to decide which of these English translations is best.

I immediately eliminate the NIV translation that says:

“...he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.”

The reason I am willing to strike the NIV from consideration is that it conflicts with its own translation of both Deuteronomy 24:16, and also Ezekiel 18:20. Deuteronomy 24:16 in the NIV says:

“Fathers shall not be put to death for their children, nor children put to death for their fathers; each is to die for his own sin.”

And Ezekiel 18:20 in the NIV says:

“The son will not share the guilt of the father, nor will the father share the guilt of the son.”

Those are both in conflict with saying that “*he punishes the children for the sins of the fathers.*” So the NIV is out.

Now I turn to the Stern translation. It says:

“...but causing the negative effects of the parents’ offenses to be experienced by their children and grandchildren, and even by the third and fourth generations.”

That’s not bad, except for the gratuitous word “negative,” but I am inclined to receive it because if a father’s sin affects his children and grandchildren in any way, it is likely to be negative.

There are a number of other passages of Scriptures such as Numbers 14:18 that use parallel language, and two identical Scriptures that, in almost all modern translations, add the phrase “*of*

those who hate Me,” seeming to indicate that the children of those who hate God will have their father’s iniquity visited on them regardless of whether or not the children themselves are guilty. These to which I am referring are Exodus 20:5-6 and Deuteronomy 5:9-10, and they both read as follows:

“...you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, ⁶ but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.”

Do you catch why saying the “generations of those who hate me” refers to the fathers who hate God? It is because they – the fathers – produce the generations.

But once again, all is not what it seems from English translations because the Hebrew word underlying the phrase “of those who hate me” is *l’snay* (יָאֵן לְשֹׂנְאֵי). The vowel under the *lamed* of *l’snay* is a *shvah*, so both of the Scriptures I just read can and probably should be translated “to those who hate me,” rather than “of those who hate me,” meaning that the fathers’ sins will only be visited on those sons who themselves are disobedient. Sons who love God and live repentant lives will not have to worry about these Scriptures affecting them. Jay P. Green’s “Literal Translation of the Bible” agrees with me on this, that Exodus 20:5 should be translated “*to those who hate Me,*” but then, regretfully, he is not consistent in his own translation of Deuteronomy 5:9. See what I mean? **It’s enough to cross a Rabbi’s eyes!**

I found a beautifully clear explanation of all this in Abraham Cohen’s commentary on Exodus 20:5 found in the Hertz *Chumash*:

“visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children. The Torah does not teach here or elsewhere that the sins of the guilty fathers shall be visited upon their innocent children. The soul that sinneth it shall die proclaims the Prophet Ezekiel. And in the administration of justice by the state, the Torah distinctly lays down, ‘the fathers shall not be put to death for the children, neither shall the children be put to death for the fathers; every man shall be put to death for his own sin’ (Deut. 24:16). However, human experience all too plainly teaches the moral interdependence of parents and children. The bad example set by a father frequently corrupts those that come after him. His most dreadful bequest to his children is not a liability to punishment, but a liability to the commission of fresh offences. In every parent, therefore, the love of God, as a restraining power from evil actions, should be reinforced by love for his children; that they should not inherit the tendency to commit, and suffer the consequences of, his transgressions.”

Now to really imbed this in our minds, let’s do a short Bible study of Ezekiel 18:4-32, but remember that its reference to dying for violating statutes is because it is referring to life under the Mosaic Covenant.

“Behold, all souls are Mine; The soul of the father As well as the soul of the son is Mine; The soul who sins shall die.” (verse 4).

So that's plain. Each person's conduct determines his own destiny.

"But if a man is just And does what is lawful and right; if he has not eaten on the mountains, Nor lifted up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, Nor defiled his neighbor's wife, Nor approached a woman during her impurity; if he has not oppressed anyone, But has restored to the debtor his pledge; Has robbed no one by violence, But has given his bread to the hungry And covered the naked with clothing; if he has not exacted usury Nor taken any increase, But has withdrawn his hand from iniquity And executed true judgment between man and man; if he has walked in My statutes And kept My judgments faithfully -- He is just; He shall surely live!" Says the Lord GOD." (verses 5-9).

Again, a person's righteous conduct of obeying God results in life for that person. We continue:

"If he begets a son who is a robber or a shedder of blood, Who does any of these things And does none of those duties," (verses 10-11).

So now we're talking about a righteous father who has an unrighteous son.

"but has eaten on the mountains or defiled his neighbor's wife; if he has oppressed the poor and needy, Robbed by violence, not restored the pledge, Lifted his eyes to the idols, or committed abomination; if he has exacted usury or taken increase -- Shall he then live? He shall not live! If he has done any of these abominations, He shall surely die; His blood shall be upon him." (verses 12-13).

So an unrighteous son of a righteous father will die for his sin, and his father's righteousness will not save him. We continue:

"If, however, he begets a son who sees all the sins which his father has done, and considers but does not do likewise;" (verse 14).

The story continues with the unrighteous son himself having a son, but his son is righteous.

"who has not eaten on the mountains, or lifted his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, nor defiled his neighbor's wife; has not oppressed anyone, nor withheld a pledge, nor robbed by violence, but has given his bread to the hungry and covered the naked with clothing; who has withdrawn his hand from the poor and not received usury or increase, but has executed My judgments and walked in My statutes – he shall not die for the iniquity of his father; he shall surely live!" (verses 15-17).

So once again, the righteous son lives despite the sin of his father, but we are reminded of what happens to the father.

"As for his father, Because he cruelly oppressed, Robbed his brother by violence, And did what is not good among his people, Behold, he shall die for his iniquity." (verse 18).

So the father dies for his sins. Then Scripture anticipates that someone will object and claim that the son should be held responsible for his father's sins. Kind of marked through a family curse. But God says NO! Let's read further:

"Yet you say, 'Why should the son not bear the guilt of the father?' Because the son has done what is lawful and right, and has kept all My statutes and observed them, he shall surely live. The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not bear the guilt of the father, nor the father bear the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself." (verses 19-20).

So, speaking through Ezekiel, God makes it plain that each person – the father and the son – is responsible for his own conduct, and neither will die for the other. Continuing with verse 21:

"But if a wicked man turns from all his sins which he has committed, keeps all My statutes, and does what is lawful and right, he shall surely live; he shall not die."

The subject has now changed to the wicked man who repents, and we see that his repentance will save him.

"None of the transgressions which he has committed shall be remembered against him; because of the righteousness which he has done, he shall live. 'Do I have any pleasure at all that the wicked should die?' says the Lord GOD, 'and not that he should turn from his ways and live?'" (verses 22-23)

God is saying that he wants to encourage – not discourage -- wicked men to repent. That He would rather that wicked men repent and live than that mere justice be done and they die. But now the opposite – when a righteous man casts away his mantle of righteousness.

"But when a righteous man turns away from his righteousness and commits iniquity, and does according to all the abominations that the wicked man does, shall he live? All the righteousness which he has done shall not be remembered; because of the unfaithfulness of which he is guilty and the sin which he has committed, because of them he shall die." (verse 24)

Wait! That's not fair! What about everything I did that was good before I turned bad? Verses 25-28 anticipate this question and answer it:

"Yet you say, 'The way of the Lord is not fair.' Hear now, O house of Israel, is it not My way which is fair, and your ways which are not fair? When a righteous man turns away from his righteousness, commits iniquity, and dies in it, it is because of the iniquity which he has done that he dies. Again, when a wicked man turns away from the wickedness which he committed, and does what is lawful and right, he preserves himself alive. Because he considers and turns away from all the transgressions which he committed, he shall surely live; he shall not die."

We had better watch it now, because in verses 29-32, God is getting upset!

“Yet the house of Israel says, 'The way of the Lord is not fair.' O house of Israel, is it not My ways which are fair, and your ways which are not fair? Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways," says the Lord GOD. "Repent, and turn from all your transgressions, so that iniquity will not be your ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions which you have committed, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit. For why should you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies,' says the Lord GOD. 'Therefore turn and live!'"

And there's the bottom line, and so ends our Ezekiel Bible Study. Every one of us will be judged according to our own righteousness or unrighteousness, and a life of righteousness will not counteract one ounce of unrepentant sin. No credit is given for being good if we turn bad. On the other hand, if we sin and repent, God will forgive us.

So what practical lessons can we learn from this *parashah*? First of all, if we are a father or mother and are tempted to sin, we ought to reflect on how unkind we are being to our children and grandchildren who, as Cohen says, may inherit the tendency to commit, and suffer the consequences of the same sin. And if we are a child, grandchild or great grandchild of someone we know has committed a particular sin, we shouldn't bewail our being under a curse and go around trying to break generational curses. Instead, we should guard ourselves against falling into sin through similar temptations that beset our parent, grandparent, or great grandparent, and be confident that we can have victory over our temptations to sin – especially in Yeshua and with the help of the Holy Spirit. But if we blow it and we do sin, let's not blame God for allowing the temptation. Instead, let's be encouraged that if we repent sincerely, we will be forgiven, and our sin will not be remembered.