

Adam Clarke:

Introduction

The Jews, in Ezekiel's time, complained of God's dealing hardly with them in punishing them for the sins of their forefathers, Ezekiel 18:1, Ezekiel 18:2; their temporal calamities having been long threatened as the consequence of the national guilt, (Jeremiah 15:4, etc.); and, from the general complexion of this chapter, it appears that the Jews so interpreted the second commandment of the Decalogue and other passages of like import, as if the sins of the forefathers were visited upon the children, independently of the moral conduct of the latter, not only in this world, but in that which is to come. To remove every foundation for such an unworthy idea of the Divine government, God assures them, with an oath, that he had no respect of persons, Ezekiel 18:3, Ezekiel 18:4; strongly intimating that the great mysteries in Providence, (mysterious only on account of the limited capacity of man), are results of the most impartial administration of justice; and that this would be particularly manifested in the rewards and punishments of another life; when every ligament that at present connects societies and nations together shall be dissolved, and each person receive according to his work, and bear his own burden. This is illustrated by a variety of examples: such as that of a just or righteous man, Ezekiel 18:5-9; his wicked son, Ezekiel 18:10-13; and again the just son of this wicked person, Ezekiel 18:14-20. Then a wicked man repenting, and finding mercy, whose former wickedness shall be no impediment to his salvation, Ezekiel 18:21-23; and a righteous man revolting, and dying in his sins, whose former righteousness shall be of no avail, Ezekiel 18:24. The conduct of the Divine Providence is then vindicated, Ezekiel 18:25-29; and all persons, without any exception, most earnestly exhorted to repentance, Ezekiel 18:30, Ezekiel 18:31; because the Lord hath no pleasure in the death of the sinner, Ezekiel 18:32. As the whole of this chapter is taken up with the illustration of a doctrine nearly connected with the comfort of man, and the honor of the Divine government, the prophet, with great propriety, lays aside his usual mode of figure and allegory, and treats his subject with the utmost plainness and perspicuity.

Verse 2

The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge? - We have seen this proverb already, Jeremiah 31:29, etc., and have considered its general meaning. But the subject is here proposed in greater detail, with a variety of circumstances, to adapt it to all those cases to which it should apply. It refers simply to these questions: How far can the moral evil of the parent be extended to his offspring? And, Are the faults and evil propensities of the parents, not only transferred to the children, but punished in them? Do parents transfer their evil nature, and are their children punished for their offenses?

Verse 3

As I live, saith the Lord God, ye shall not have occasion any more to use this proverb in Israel - I will now, by this present declaration, settle this question for ever. And hence God has sworn to what follows. After this, who will dare to doubt the judgment pronounced?

Verse 4

All souls are mine - Equally so; I am the Father of the spirits of all flesh, and shall deal impartially with the whole.

The soul that sinneth, it shall die - None shall die for another's crimes, none shall be saved by another's righteousness. Here is the general judgment relative to the righteousness and unrighteousness of men, and the influence of one man's state on that of another; particularly in respect to their moral conduct.

Verse 5

If a man be just, and do that which is lawful and right - If he be just or holy within, and do what is according to law and equity. What is meant by this, is immediately specified.

Verse 6

1.

Hath not eaten upon the mountains - Idolatrous worship was generally performed on mountains and hills; and those who offered sacrifices feasted on the sacrifice, and thus held communion with the idol.

2.

Neither hath lifted up his eyes to the idols - Has paid them no religious adoration; has trusted in them for nothing, and has not made prayer nor supplication before them.

3.

Neither hath defiled his neighbor's wife - Has had no adulterous connection with any woman; to which idolatrous feasts and worship particularly led.

4.

Neither hath come nigh to a menstruous woman - Has abstained from the use of the marriage-bed during the periodical indisposition of his wife. This was absolutely forbidden by the law; and both the man and the woman who disobeyed the command were to be put to death, Leviticus 20:18. For which Calmet gives this reason: "It has been believed, and experience confirms it, that the children conceived at such times are either leprous, or monsters, or deformed by their diminutiveness, or by the disproportion of their members." There are other reasons for this law, should those of the learned commentator be found invalid.

Verse 7

5.

Hath not oppressed any - Has not used his power or influence to oppress, pain, or injure another.

6.

Hath restored to the debtor his pledge - Has carefully surrendered the pawn or pledge when its owner came to redeem it. As the pledge is generally of more worth than that for which it is pledged, an unprincipled man will make some pretense to keep it; which is highly abominable in the sight of God.

7.

Hath spoiled none by violence - Either by robbery or personal insult. For a man may be spoiled both ways.

8.

Hath given his bread to the hungry - Has been kind-hearted and charitable; especially to them that are in the deepest want.

9.

Hath covered the naked with a garment - Has divided both his bread and his clothing with the necessitous. These are two branches of the same root.

Verse 8

10.

Hath not given forth upon usury - $\text{לֹא יִשָּׂא בְּרֵעֵהוּ מִנְּסִיחָה}$ (beneshech lo yitten). נָסַח (nasach) signifies to bite; usury is properly so termed, because it bites into and devours the principal. Usury signifies, with us, exacting unlawful interest for money; and taking the advantage of a man's necessities to advance him cash on exorbitant profit. This bites the receiver in his property, and the lender in his salvation.

11.

Neither hath taken any increase - In lending has not required more than was lent; and has not taken that product of the cash lent, which was more than the value for its use. This may be a part of the tenth article.

12.

That hath withdrawn his hand from iniquity - Never associates with those who act contrary to justice and equity; his hand or influence being never found among evil workers.

13.

Hath executed true judgment between man and man - Being neither swayed by prejudice, fear, nor favor.

These thirteen points concern his social and civil relations.

Verse 9

Hath walked in my statutes - Not only acknowledging them to be right, but acting according to them. Especially in every thing that relates to my worship, changing nothing, neglecting nothing.

And hath kept my judgments, to deal truly - Has attended to my Divine direction, both with respect to things forbidden, and things commanded. These concern men in their religious conduct.

He is just - צַדִּיק הוּא (tsaddik hu). He is a righteous man; he has given to all their due; he has abstained

from every appearance of evil, and done that which was lawful and right in the sight of God.

He shall surely live - He has lived to me, and he shall live with me.

Verse 10

If he beget a son - Who is the reverse of the above righteous character, according to the thirteen articles already specified and explained.

Verse 13

Shall he then live? - Because his father was a righteous man, shall the father's holiness be imputed to him? No!

He shall surely die; his blood shall be upon him - He shall suffer for his own crimes.

Verse 14

Now, lo, if he beget a son that seeth all his father's sins - and considereth - Lays to heart the evil of his father's life, and the dreadful consequences of a life of rebellion against God.

And doeth not such like - Is quite a different man in moral feeling and character; and acts up to the thirteen points already laid down.

Verse 17

He shall not die for the iniquity of his father - He shall no more be affected by his father's crimes, than his father was benefited by his grandfather's righteousness.

Verse 20

The soul that sinneth, it shall die - Hitherto we have had to do with the simple cases of the righteous and the wicked; of him who lived and died a holy man, and of him who lived and died a wicked man. But there are two cases behind:

1. That of the wicked man, who repents and turns to God.

2. That of the righteous man, who backslides, and does not return to God by repentance. On both these cases God decides thus: -

Verse 21

But if the wicked will turn from all his sins - And afterwards walk according to the character of the righteous already specified shall he find mercy, and be for ever saved? Yes.

Verse 22

All his transgressions - Shall be so completely forgiven by God's mercy, that they shall not be even mentioned to him; and if he live and die in this recovered state, he shall live with God to all eternity. And why? Hear the reason: -

Verse 23

Have I any pleasure at all that the wicked should die? - No! That is foreign to him whose name is love, and whose nature is mercy. On the contrary he would will that he should return from his evil ways and live. And if God can have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, he cannot have made a decree to abandon him to the evil of his nature, and then damn him for what he could not avoid: for as God can do nothing with which he is not pleased, so he can decree nothing with which he is not pleased. But he is not pleased with the death of a sinner; therefore he cannot have made a decree to bring him to this death.

Verse 24

When the righteous turneth away from his righteousness - Here is the second case. Can a man who was once holy and pure fall away so as to perish everlastingly? Yes. For God says, "If he turn away from his righteousness;" not his self-righteousness, the gloss of theologians: for God never speaks of turning away from that, for, in his eyes, that is a nonentity. There is no righteousness or holiness but what himself infuses into the soul of man, and as to self-righteousness, i.e., a man's supposing himself to be righteous when he has not the life of God in his soul, it is the delusion of a dark and hardened heart; therefore it is the real righteous principle and righteous practice that God speaks of here. And he tells us, that all man may so turn away from this, and so commit iniquity, and act as the wicked man, that his righteousness

shall be no more mentioned to his account, than the sins of the penitent backslider should be mentioned to his condemnation; and "in the sin that he" this once righteous man, "hath sinned, and in the trespass that he hath trespassed, in them shall he die." O, how awful a termination of a life once distinguished for righteousness and true holiness! So then, God himself informs us that a righteous man may not only fall foully, but fall finally. But to such righteous persons the devil will ever preach, "Ye shall not surely die; ye shall be as God." Touch, taste, and handle; ye cannot ultimately fall. Thus we find, by the manner of treating these two cases, that God's way is equal, Ezekiel 18:25; just, merciful, and impartial. And to prove this, he sums up his conduct in the above cases, in the following Ezekiel 18:26-29. And then, that the "wicked may not die in his sins," and that the "backslider may return and find mercy," he thus exhorts: -

Verse 30

Repent, and turn yourselves from all your transgressions - There is still life; still a God that has no pleasure in the death of a sinner. one who is ever ready to give his Holy Spirit to all them that ask him; therefore "repent and turn, so iniquity shall not be your ruin."

Verse 31

Cast away - With a holy violence, dash away every transgression and incentive to it.

Make you a new heart - Call upon God for it, and he will give it: for as sure as you earnestly call on God through Christ to save you, so surely you shall be saved; and the effect will so speedily follow, that God is pleased to attribute that in some sort to yourselves, which is done by his grace alone; because ye earnestly call upon him for it, come in the right way to receive it, and are determined never to rest till you have it.

For why will ye die - Who should you go to hell while the kingdom of God is open to receive you? Why should you be the devil's slaves, when ye may be Christ's freemen! Why Will Ye Die? Every word is emphatic. Why - show God or man one reason. Will - obstinacy alone, - a determination not to be saved, or a voluntary listlessness about salvation, - can prevent you. Ye - children of so many mercies, fed and supported by a kind God all your life; ye, who are redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ; ye, who have made many promises to give up yourselves to God; ye, who have been dedicated to the ever-blessed Trinity, and promised to renounce the devil and all his works, the pomps and vanities of this wicked world, and all the sinful lusts of the flesh; why will Ye die? Die! - what is this? A separation from God and the glory of his power for ever! Die! - forfeiting all the purposes for which your immortal souls were made! Die - to know what the worm is that never dieth, and what that fire is which is never quenched! Why will ye die?

Verse 32

For I have no pleasure - God repeats what he had so solemnly declared before. Can ye doubt his sincerity? his ability? his willingness? the efficacy of the blood of his covenant?

Wherefore turn yourselves, and live ye - Reader, now give God thy heart.

Though every man comes into the world with a fallen nature - a soul infected with sin, yet no man is damned on that account. He who refuses that grace which pardons sin and heals infected nature, who permits the evil principle to break out into transgression, and continues and dies in his iniquity and sin, and will not come unto Christ that he may have life; he, and he only, goes to perdition. Nor will the righteousness of a parent or relation help his sinful soul: no man can have more grace than is necessary to save himself; and none can have that, who does not receive it through Christ Jesus. It is the mercy of God in Christ which renders the salvation of a sinner possible; and it is that mercy alone which can heal the backslider. The atoning blood blots out all that is past; the same blood cleanses from all unrighteousness. Who believes so as to apply for this redemption? Who properly thanks God for having provided such a Savior?