

Sins of the Fathers

I was sent this question from a subscriber. *‘Does God sometimes punish the fathers’ sin on the sons, even if the sons are elect and God is not angry with the sons? God loves me but is my sickness the result of God judging someone else’s sin in my family.’*

This is my answer (which I have expanded and re-worked).

The problem of generational sin

It is common today, especially in Charismatic and Pentecostal circles, to hear about the need to confront generational sins. That is, a believer can suffer for certain sins of ancestors (not all types) unless he has specifically confessed them and sought forgiveness for them. The types of sins are usually involving the occult or membership of certain factions, such as Freemasonry.

Teachers on this bandwagon thus give their disciples massive lists, sometimes reaching hundreds of points, which they are supposed to check out regarding distant ancestors. For example, if a great, great grandmother went to visit mediums, then this needs specific confession now. If a great, great, uncle was a warlock then this has brought a curse on the family which needs breaking. Often this generational sin is viewed as being the reason why a person is not healed.

Under the guise of trying to break bondage, Christians who submit to this teaching and who are free in Christ are actually brought into bondage to a lie.

Certain Scriptures are given to form a supposed foundation for this doctrine.

Background: the beginning of generational sins and curses

After the influence of Freud, who claimed that many character problems arose from issues created by parents and family background, people began to avoid personal responsibility for habitual sins and weaknesses and instead blamed their upbringing.¹ The whole basis of psychological counselling is to find the source of character problems outside of the person. This idea has significantly developed to this day so that even criminals are often seen as victims of their background instead of guilty for crimes committed.

As occult influences began to filter into Charismatic theology, at the beginning of the Pentecostal Movement, this combined with current Freudian ideas then gaining sway and ultimately developed into positing that harmful sins were committed in a person’s ancestry. The key to present bondage was not personal responsibility to walk by faith and truth but to blame it on an ancestor.

¹ The idea of transferring blame for my sins and failings to someone else gained ‘medical’ [not at all scientific] credibility during the last hundred years through the development of psychoanalysis and psychological disciplines. This began with Sigmund Freud [1856–1939] and was enhanced by his followers, who believed that early childhood (especially nervousness about sex) was the main source of adult problems. Carl Jung introduced a more metaphysical occult element into psychology, while Alfred Adler introduced the idea of inferiority complex. Thus adult problems were caused by parents, especially mothers, which originated in their parents, going back generations. Many modern counselling therapies in churches are based upon these secular principles.

Charismatics and Pentecostals thus developed a teaching of generational sin even leading to demonic possession of children. Very often Christians are told that a witch in the family line has brought a spirit of witchcraft into the family and they need deliverance from that before they can progress; or that someone in their ancestry was cursed.

People are then told to deal with this in a variety of erroneous ways. Some seek a so-called 'word of knowledge' regarding a specific sinner and occult activity in ones' genealogy. Others are told to list the sins of their parents and other ancestors and confess each and every one specifically as if it were ones' own. How on earth anyone could list the sins of a distant relative is beyond me. I could not even list my own sins, I am such a great sinner by nature (and so is everyone else!). Neither can I repent for someone else's sin.

Often Charismatics then apply the false practice of demonic exorcism to rid a person of the demonic cause of sin that began in a past relative. Thus a great-grandparent that went to a medium in the 19th century supposedly brought in a spirit of witchcraft into the family line and this needs to be exorcised from the Christian.

All this is absolute nonsense. The theology of generational sin is a lie; nowhere is this taught in Scripture. In fact even the Old Testament tells us that people die for their own individual sin and not someone else's. Believers are not under some generational curse either. Believers are brought into the liberty of the sons of God (Gal 5:13; Rm 8:21) and into the kingdom of light in Christ (Col 1:12-13). Even if someone actually curses you (much more powerful than some supposed curse in history) Scripture considers it of little importance and tells us to bless people who do this to us (Ps 109:28; Matt 5:44; Lk 6:28). Curses on the Lord's people are turned into blessings

God turned the curse into a blessing. Neh 13:2 (and Deut 23:5)

The Lord's people are not under any kind of bondage to generational sins or curses but are free:

Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage. Gal 5:1

Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord *is*, there *is* liberty. 2 Cor 3:17

Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed. Jn 8:36

Let us examine this doctrine more carefully.

The Biblical source of the idea of generational sin

Teachers of generational sin claim to find support from Scripture; and there are some verses which, at first sight, appear to offer some support.

Under the Old Covenant the sins of the fathers were sometimes brought upon their children and grandchildren, but there is never a suggestion that the innocent were punished for the guilty.

Often this was suffering the normal effects of the sin, as an alcoholic father who will bring his son into all sorts of disadvantages. Very often children will continue in the sins of their father by their own choice.

It is a truth that sin affects more than the sinner; sin spreads. This is evidenced today, such as when a wife commits adultery and divorces her husband; the psychological effects on young children are life-long. The sin of an adulterer who abandons children affects very many people in the family and close friends. However, the sins of the children are their own choice; they do not have to follow the example of their father or mother. Some people respond to suffering by rebelling against God; others seek God for help and find mercy. Some children copy their father's sins but others repudiate them and use them as a springboard to be different.

The Bible never teaches that children are punished for the sins of others. It is a principle of the Mosaic Law that only the guilty were punished for their own sins,

Fathers shall not be put to death for *their* children, nor shall the children be put to death for *their* fathers; a person shall be put to death for his own sin. Deut 24:16

But the children of the murderers he did not execute, according to what is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, in which the LORD commanded, saying, 'Fathers shall not be put to death for their children, nor shall children be put to death for their fathers; but a person shall be put to death for his own sin.' 2 Kgs 14:6

Sinners often follow the sins of their fathers but they are judged individually. Everyone has a choice and the soul that sins shall die (Ezek 18:4). The bad influence of sinful fathers led some children to commit the same sins, and thus they were guilty for their own sins.

Both sin and grace work in family lines unless God, in his mercy, saves someone out of that line (as he did in my case – there were no evangelical Christians in my family at that time). Believers are to bring children up in the faith and pray for them to find God. Usually this is the case and believers generally raise godly children; but sometimes children rebel and are lost.

The mercy of the LORD *is* from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him, and His righteousness to children's children. Ps 103:17

Similarly, the world produces sinful people in generational lines. Children are raised to disobey God and care nothing for God's law.

However, if a rebellious child turns from his sin, he will find mercy,

And those of you who are left shall waste away in their iniquity in your enemies' lands; also in their fathers' iniquities, which are with them, they shall waste away. *But* if they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their fathers, with their unfaithfulness in which they were unfaithful to Me, and that they also have walked contrary to Me, and *that* I also have walked contrary to them and have brought them into the land of their enemies; if their uncircumcised hearts are humbled, and they accept their guilt - then I will remember My covenant with Jacob, and My covenant with Isaac and My covenant with Abraham I will remember; I will remember the land. Lev 26:39-42

So, basic foundational principles are:

1. God punishes individuals for their own sin and not for the sin of someone else.
2. Sinful parents lead their children, by example, into committing similar sins and rebelling against God.
3. If a person turns from his sin and rebellion and seeks God's mercy, he will find forgiveness.

Verses which may suggest generational sin, and which are used by heretics, cannot overturn these basic spiritual principles.

Analysis of specific texts used to support the idea of generational sin

We need to examine the texts used by false teachers regarding the sins of the fathers.

Our fathers sinned *and are* no more, but we bear their iniquities. Lam 5:7

In this specific case the reference is to national sins. The continual apostasy and idolatry of Israel called for punishment in the form of exile when God's patience ran out. Those sent into exile were just as guilty as their fathers who had apostatised.

You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness *of anything* that *is* in heaven above, or that *is* in the earth beneath, or that *is* in the water under the earth; 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, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments. Ex 20:4-6 and Deut 5:8-10

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.'

Ex 34:6-7

The LORD is longsuffering and abundant in mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression; but He by no means clears *the guilty*, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth *generation*. 'Num 14:18

You show lovingkindness to thousands, and repay the iniquity of the fathers into the bosom of their children after them. Jer 32:18

These can be taken together since they speak about the same thing.

We have to ask ourselves, 'What is basically being taught here?' The first thing is that God, in the giving of the law, is saying that people who obey that law will be righteous and find mercy and people who disobey that law will be iniquitous and be condemned. That is the chief simple point. There are two types of people, law-keepers who love God and law-breakers who commit idolatry and hate God. Those who love God are not free from sin but they find forgiveness and mercy and are under God's loving-kindness.

The second point is that God particularly has idolatry in mind in this commandment (Ex 20:4-6) and the implication is of national sin. Indeed, the history of Israel shows that this was a repeated national problem.

The chief difficulty is the clause, 'visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation'. What does this mean?

Firstly, it shows the iniquity of setting a bad example. Many sinful children were led into bad habits by their sinful parents. God will judge this for actual sin committed; 'visiting' implies 'punishing'. However, we have already seen that children do not have to follow this bad example and if they turn to God they will find mercy. The bad example is not causative but is only an influence. The child has a conscience and can decide for himself.

Secondly it does not mean that innocent children are judged for the sins of their father; that is contrary to divine justice and law.

What it is referring to is that when Israel chose to commit idolatry, God would allow men to continue in that sin for no more than four generations. However, his covenant commitment to those who found mercy was for thousands of generations (i.e. forever).² This is evidenced in Israel's history and particularly in the repeated idolatries seen in the book of Judges. After each deliverance by a judge, Israel again fell into worse idolatry than before. The longest period of subjugation was forty years under the Philistines until Samson brought deliverance. The periods of deliverance were generally longer than the periods of slavery.

The point is that, under the Old Covenant in Israel, God only allows men to follow the idolatrous sins of their father for up to four generations. These texts emphasise God's covenant mercy and teach nothing about generational culpability.

And those of you who are left shall waste away in their iniquity in your enemies' lands; also in their fathers' iniquities, which are with them, they shall waste away. Lev 26:39

This is a simple statement to explain how Israel would come under God's judgment if it does not listen to God and disobeys (Lev 26:27). The iniquity of the children is the same as the iniquity of the fathers (i.e. idolatry). They waste away in their own iniquity; they were not without guilt. This warning in Leviticus is repeated in the curses in Deuteronomy. It is a simple observation that the children sin in the same way as their fathers.

And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brothers outside. ... So Noah awoke from his wine, and knew what his younger son had done to him. Then he said: 'Cursed *be* Canaan; a servant of servants he shall be to his brethren.' And he said: 'Blessed *be* the LORD, The God of Shem, and may Canaan be his servant. May God enlarge Japheth, and may he dwell in the tents of Shem; and may Canaan be his servant.' Gen 9:22-27

There is no indication in these verses that Canaan would be innocent and punished unfairly. Noah's curse upon Canaan was not for the sin of Ham but a prescient statement regarding Canaan's future idolatry. The actual sins of the Canaanites were the reason why God brought Israel into Canaan to dispossess them in judgment. As Ham had sinned, so his children would sin and thus would serve God's people; Semites in the form of Israel.

Under the New Covenant there is no idea of generational sin.

Speaking of the coming New Covenant, Jeremiah says,

In those days they shall say no more: 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.' But every one shall die for his own iniquity; every man who eats the sour grapes, his teeth shall be set on edge. Jer 31: 29-30

Ezekiel says the same,

² 'He shows mercy to the thousandths, i.e., to the thousandth generation. The cardinal number is used here for the ordinal, for which there was no special form in the case of קל"א.' [Keil & Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, in. loc.]

What do you mean when you use this proverb concerning the land of Israel, saying: 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge'? 'As I live,' says the Lord GOD, 'you shall no longer use this proverb in Israel. 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.' Ezek 18:2-4

As a national judgment for idolatry, under the Old Covenant God allows iniquity to have an effect, but in his mercy to Israel that effect is restricted to up to four generations. This is proved to be the case in all Israel's history. Even in the case of the exile into Babylon, this only lasted for seventy years; much less than four Biblical generations of forty years (i.e. 160 years). So Israel languished under the effects of idolatry and subjugation from the nations where that idolatry came from for up to four generations.

Under the New Covenant all is different. Israel is no longer the people of God. The kingdom is removed from Israel (Matt 21:43) and universalised to include people from all nations. Since there is no longer a theocracy, this principle of the sins of the fathers is cancelled, along with all the other external forms of the Mosaic Law.

The latter writing prophets, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, prophesy about this change where God's people are no longer viewed corporately as a nation (Israel) but are viewed individually in Christ. These individuals are not affected by the sins of their fathers or by national judgments.

Thus the elect are certainly not affected by the sins of their fathers in the new nature. In the flesh they may be affected (as in the case of a bad father setting a bad example) but in their new life they are sons of God and not sons of man. Thus they are not victims of sin but heirs of grace and mercy. Believers can put off the old nature that is influenced by sin.

What about sickness?

Regarding sickness, this is determined by God's sovereign will to effect his glory. God controls all human suffering, not some ancestor. Suffering has a purpose and is not mechanically the result of generational sins (as claimed by Charismatic theology).

Now as *Jesus* passed by, He saw a man who was blind from birth. And His disciples asked Him, saying, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' Jesus answered, 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him.' Jn 9:1-3

Again, believers are not under the anger of God, even for the sin of their fathers. Believers are loved by God and their suffering is the fulness of Christ's sufferings and not the result of sin (Col 1:24). The many sufferings of Paul were considered by him to be fulfilling the suffering of Christ in the body of Christ (2 Cor 1:5; Phil 3:10).

This is only different in the case of a believer who sins and does not repent, living in the old nature; as a final measure God afflicts him in some way to bring about repentance (Jm 5:15; Heb 12:5-10). Thus some (not all) sickness is a measure used by God to discipline his children. Suffering is also used by God to train our character, such as by teaching us patience (Rm 5:3; Jm 1:2-3).

Believers do not suffer as a result of the sin of some ancestor. All Christian suffering is directly permitted by God for an ulterior motive – to glorify him and to train the disciple (see the book of Job where this is worked out in detail).

Errors in the teaching of generational sins

It makes the redemption of sin and freedom from Satan the result of human merit.

Freeing a person from the sin of a forbear is achieved through the actions of the Charismatic in discovering and confessing an ancestor's sin, or by a person exorcising a demon. The Bible tells us that there is no human merit or work of any kind involved in salvation. It is all the work of Christ. Justification (a declaration of righteousness) is by faith and not by works.

It denies the value of Christ's work.

The Lord tells us that he makes us free (Jn 8:36); that the truth sets us free (Jn 8:32); that we are delivered out of Satan's domain by the cross (Col 1:12-13) and that there is no longer any condemnation for those in Christ Jesus (i.e. in the new nature, Rm 8:1). We could add many more victorious blessings. The teaching about generational sins and curses denies all these, saying that despite being saved we are still in bondage to the enemy.

It denies God's attributes

By averring that I suffer from the sins and actions of an ancestor I did not even know, this teaching abuses God's attributes. Firstly, it makes God a liar since his word tells me that I am not condemned once I have put my faith in Christ and I'm walking in his Spirit. If I am still condemned as a justified believer then God's word is wrong.

Secondly, it makes God unjust since I am being condemned and afflicted for the sake of sins committed by another. This is a denial of heavenly impartial justice. Since the ancestor would have been condemned for his sin, then for me to be affected by it means that God is punishing the sin twice. This is also a denial of impartial justice.

Thirdly, it makes the doer of wickedness in the past greater than God's ability to atone for sin in the present. If a past ancestral sin damages a believer in Christ who has not committed that sin himself, then the salvation given by God is insufficient, incomplete and weak.

It claims that I can be guilty for another person's acts.

It is a principle of divine justice that each soul is condemned for his own sins. It is the soul that sins which dies. There is no transference of guilt for another person's sins from human to human.

Christians are not the victim of any curse

Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree'), that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith. Gal 3:13-

14

The believer has a new nature, which is the image of Christ. This nature is full of the blessings of God. Everybody in the flesh is under God's curse because they have disobeyed his law, which results in a curse. But every person abiding in Christ and walking in his Spirit is free from all curses and bondage.

If a Christian fails to live in the new nature and returns to life in the old nature (wherein he sins), he can then be brought under bondage.

Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world. But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, 'Abba,

Father! Therefore you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ. But then, indeed, when you did not know God, you served those which by nature are not gods. But now after you have known God, or rather are known by God, how *is it that* you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements, to which you desire again to be in bondage? Gal 4:3-9

The answer to this is not to try to deal with the past sin of previous generations (which is impossible) but to confess one's sin and begin again to put on the new man.

Christians are not under bondage in Christ

Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage. Heb 2:14-15

The cross has destroyed the ability of Satan to bring God's called out people into bondage. As long as believers live by faith and put on Christ they are free from all bondage to sin and Satan. The answer to bondage is not dealing with generational sins, or deliverance from evil spirits, but living in Christ.

Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to *fulfil its* lusts. Rm 13:14

Put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness. Eph 4:24

Conclusion

The doctrine of generational sins and curses afflicting Christians is a lie, a heresy. There is no truth in it and there is no Biblical teaching on this subject whatsoever. The few OT verses which are used to support this evil doctrine are twisted out of context and do not have any relation to this doctrine at all.

Even if a person cannot understand the proper meaning of the OT verses involved, he should accept the overwhelming teaching of the NT. This makes crystal clear that believers walking in the Spirit are not under bondage, are not under a curse, are not in Satan's kingdom but are in Christ, in glory and in a place of grace and blessing. These are the Scriptures which ought to be meditated upon.

For it pleased *the Father that* in Him all the fullness should dwell, and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross. And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His sight -- if indeed you continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away from the hope of the gospel which you heard. Col 1:19-23

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