

The Results of Sin

But in the fourth generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete. Gen 15:16

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. Exod 20:5-6

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.' Exod 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 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 upon 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. Deut 5:9-10

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

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

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

'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. ... If, however, he begets a son Who sees all the sins which his father has done, And considers but does not do likewise ... He shall not die for the iniquity of his father; He shall surely live! 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.' Ezek 18:2-3, 14-20

Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers' *guilt*. Matt 23:32

Introduction

There is a problem of interpretation here which confuses many, for it seems that in some places God punishes the children of sinners to the fourth generation, yet in other places says that the children only suffer for their own sins and not their father's. What are we to make of this?

Initial observations

There is no discrepancy

Deut 24:16 establishes that under the Mosaic Law each person died for his own sin. This entirely complies with the later revelation given to Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Divine law does not punish the innocent, but only the actual sinner. Thus both the earlier and later

revelation is in complete agreement. What we must consider is what the other Scriptures mean, what are they applicable to?

Sins of the fathers has an effect on children

Sin always has consequences in families. If a father is a drunkard and wastes all his money, his children's upbringing will be severely damaged. Disease, depravity, addictions, violence and poverty all cause material and psychological harm to children as well as the parent. In addition there is the example set by the father; abused children often become abusers themselves.

The danger of idolatry

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. Exod 20:5-6 [Also Num 14:18; Deut 5:9-10; Exod 34:6-7; Lam 5:7.]

This is part of the Ten Commandments and a basic principle of law. Visiting iniquity upon children refers here to the sin of idolatry and applies to the reprobate. The sin of the reprobate is transmitted throughout generations. As children receive an organic nature from their sinful parents, so they receive the imputation of sin also. Even so, if a person rejects the sin of his father and turns to God then God will have mercy on him; but so many raised in sin merely copy their fathers and remain in sin; they are said here to hate God, and are thus sinners in their own right.

God punishes the sin of the fathers in the children to the third and fourth generation in relation to those who hate Him, and shows mercy to the thousandth generation in relation to those who love Him. [*Keil & Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament*, Johann (C.F.) Keil & Franz Delitzsch, on Exod 20:5.]

The words do not imply that the father's are not punished for their sin, neither do they say that the punishment of the fathers actual sin is meted out to children instead without any fault of their own.

Regarding idolatry, which is in view here, we have reference to national judgment. As a result of idolatry God removed his protection from Israel and gave them over to their enemies, thus the children suffered the consequences of their father's idolatry. Being put into the hands of their enemies, the Israelites were given to the gods they had trusted in, who had no power to deliver them. This continued to the third and fourth generations and is seen throughout Israel's history (especially in Judges). After this time the people then came to their senses and followed God once more. The final time this occurred was the exile in Babylon followed by the repatriation to Judaea. Though all the people corporately suffered for this sin according to God's law, faithful individuals found mercy and blessing with God, such as Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego in Babylon or Gideon in the time of the judges.

The fulness of sin

But in the fourth generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete. Gen 15:16

Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers' *guilt*. Matt 23:32

These words are prophecies regarding what sins these people would commit in the future. It is a claim that the children of these reprobate people (Gentiles in the first instance and Jews in the other) will continue in the way of their fathers and rebel against God. The fulness of the Jew's sin, begun by the rejection of Jesus, would be to crucify the Son of God. At a certain point, when the sinfulness was complete, judgment was meted out by God in punishment. For the Amorites this was genocide (completed by Israel's occupation of Canaan), for the Jews this was dispersion and cultural deprivation (completed by the Romans).

The new covenant

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 [Also Ezek 18:2-3, 14-20.]

Firstly, the historical context here is that Israel had been punished as a nation, (exiled) for the sins of their fathers, particularly those of Manasseh. The nation had followed in these sins and earned God's anger and judgment. The sour grapes were the suffering of people in exile.

Secondly, there is an irony here. There is a sense that those who used this proverb did so to affirm that they were innocent and wrongly suffering for the father's sins. This was false; they should use this proverb no more as a means of clearing their consciences.

Then there is a prophetic sense. God is saying that after the exile there would be no more corporate punishment for sin. The theocracy would not continue in the form that it had under kings. National, public punishment would not be inherited and filled up but would be a response to personal sin. Israel is not being treated as a theocratic nation now but as individuals who pay for their own sin. Thus Jn 8:24, 'Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for if you do not believe that I am He, you will die in your sins'. The destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans was due to the personal sin of Jews in rejecting the Messiah. Indeed, the chief Jews responsible imprecated their blood upon their children (Matt 27:25).

Finally there is an illustration. Sin is like a sour grape; at first sight it looks tasteful and nutritious but it sets the teeth on edge and damages the stomach. Sin tempts the eyes with desire and then ravages the personality.

The prophecy of the new covenant affirms that each man will be responsible for his own sins and judged for them. There is less emphasis upon a national effect to sin as under Mosaic Law, although Mosaic Law affirmed this principle also (Gal 6:5, 7).

Application

What can we learn from this?

Firstly, we learn that sin has effects. Modern liberals claim that individual sinful choices are fine as long as they don't effect others; but sin almost always affects others to some degree. The sins of parents affect their children and relatives; the sins of children affect their parents. The sins of someone in the public eye affect many people who look up to this person. The sins of leaders affect those that they lead, whether they lead churches or governments. The corporate sins of government affect the whole nation. The sins of a corporation affect those that they employ and those who are clients. Sometimes the sins of a corporation affect society, such as the recent sins of bankers, which damaged the economy. It is folly to think that personal sins have no effect beyond me.

The ravaging effects of sin mean that the responsibility upon parents to bring their children up in a godly manner is profound. The way a parent models ethics and trains (or doesn't) in righteousness will affect a child for his whole life. Even by the time the child is ten-years old the effect of parental training upon character is visible. Lack of responsible training by parents produces teenagers with no sense of responsibility, no self-control and no desire for self-betterment. When groups of such teenagers congregate in a given area, then society is damaged by their anti-social behaviour. The problems of society begin in the home.

Sin always begins with temptation. The root of sin is a desire to follow the satanic temptation in the old nature. Thus sin is attractive to the senses; it contains a desire for self-fulfilment in some perverse way. The basis of sin is, 'I want this now'. But like sour grapes that look fine but leave a bad aftertaste, so sin always brings a trail of destruction. One way to deal with temptation is to see the damage that will follow if you give in to it; look for the aftermath and avoid the sin.

God allows sin to come to fulness, to be ripe for judgment, and does not always respond to sin with immediate condemnation. Then sins of the Canaanites took a very long time to meet with judgment, but when it came it was devastating. The fact that a nation seems to get away with great wickedness does not mean that it is not condemned; just that God is allowing the sin to come to fulness. Indeed, the sinfulness of this world system has been allowed to continue for thousands of years and will only be ripe when Christ returns in glory. Then all those who contributed to the world's sin will be sentenced to everlasting hell. However, other sins are punished very quickly, as was the lying of Ananias and Sapphira.

God takes a very serious view of idolatry. In the theocratic nation of Israel the sin of idolatry resulted in corporate punishment lasting four generations. For unrepented idolatry Israel was repeatedly captured and occupied or exiled for four generations. The sin of Israel should be very carefully considered by Christians as a warning not to place anything before God. Now this warning is often ignored, both in materialistic terms (having objects in preference to God) and in spiritual terms (holding doctrines that distract from God). Any doctrine which tends to make believers concentrate upon something other than Christ is idolatry. One could perhaps survey churches that have taken on idolatrous doctrine (such as Jewish Root teachings, Charismatic or liberal ideas) and find that these churches went into a wilderness for several generations, or just died out. Sometimes they continue in outward form but have no real spiritual life and are dead. God is not mocked – idolatry will result in punishment. If you take your eyes off Christ and follow something else, you will suffer loss.

Finally, the whole of Scripture testifies that each person will be judged and sentenced for his own sin. There is no escape. There is no contradiction in the Bible; the soul that sins will die for his own sin. The only exception pertains to those who have a Saviour who died for them; who have Christ who took their sins upon himself and suffered the penal judgment for those sins. Glory be to God for the provision of a salvation from sin in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

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