

# THAT'S NOT FAIR!

SERIES: KNOWING THE GOD OF  
JUSTICE AND HOPE



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Ezekiel 18  
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## *Ezekiel 18*

Sooner or later, if you're a new parent, you're going to hear it from the mouth of your child. Somehow, your child will learn it, and when he or she learns it, you'll hear it. You will hear this, most likely with emphasis:

"That's not fair!"

And if you have a second child, get ready to hear it many more times.

For four years I served as a volunteer parent at a preschool co-op, and I heard the cry go up on many occasions from many children. I started paying attention. If fairness was the supposed concern of the cry, I began to listen for something like this: "I got more than she did: That's not fair!" Or, "I'm first, and he's second: That's not fair!" Or, "I broke the rules and didn't get punished: That's not fair!"

I'm still waiting.

The Israelites, suffering in exile, didn't use those precise words. Instead, they used a proverb that conveyed the same idea. If we are inclined to think that someone—or life, or God—has been unfair to us, listening for how the Lord responds to the exiles will serve us well.

## Sour grapes

**Ezekiel 18:1-4:**

**The word of the Lord came to me: 2 "What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge'? 3 As I live, declares the Lord God, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. 4 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.**

The exiles believe that they are suffering for sins of previous generations. Moreover, their use of the proverb belies a certain fatalistic outlook: they're suffering for the sins of previous generations, there's nothing they can do about their plight, and there's nothing that their God is doing about it. So they think.

Their God, however, thinks otherwise, and he challenges their outlook. All individuals in Israel, whatever generation they hail from, belong to the Lord. The fate of the current generation is not irreversibly determined by the prior generation. No, the fate of each individual Israelite is in the hands of the Lord. God's people—and all people, for that matter—live in relation to him, not according to fatalistic laws of the universe.

The exiles should have known this from their law, which was given to them by their God: "Fathers shall not be put to death for their sons, nor shall sons be put to death for their fathers; everyone shall be put to death for his own sin" (Deuteronomy 24:16, covert.)

The exiles have been focusing on previous generations, but the Lord wants them to focus on themselves. If the fathers have eaten sour grapes, could it be that the children have done so also? If the children's teeth have been set on edge, could the children be just as sinful as their fathers?

Do children suffer for the sins of their parents? Absolutely. Have we suffered for the sins of our parents? Absolutely. I have no doubt that my children are suffering—and will suffer—for my sins. In this broken world, we're all victims of other people's sins. Is our fate then irreversibly determined by the sins that have been committed against us? Is there nothing we can do about it? Is there nothing that God is doing about it?

To illustrate his point, the Lord posits a scenario that involves three men from three generations.

## The righteous man

Ezekiel 18:5-9:

**“If a man is righteous and does what is just and right— 6 if he does not eat upon the mountains or lift up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, does not defile his neighbor’s wife or approach a woman in her time of menstrual impurity, 7 does not oppress anyone, but restores to the debtor his pledge, commits no robbery, gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with a garment, 8 does not lend at interest or take any profit, withholds his hand from injustice, executes true justice between man and man, 9 walks in my statutes, and keeps my rules by acting faithfully—he is righteous; he shall surely live, declares the Lord God.**

In part one of the scenario, the Lord envisions a “righteous” man—not a man who is perfect in his behavior, of course, but one who is responsive to the Lord, which works itself out in behavior that is “just and right,” first in relationship to God and second relationship to others. The Lord declares that such a man will “surely live.”

The choice throughout Ezekiel 18 is between life and death. On the one hand, the exiles are experiencing the death of the exile, but on the other hand, they can still experience the life of God.

In part two, the Lord envisions a scenario in which the righteous man fathers a son.

## The unrighteous son of the righteous man

Ezekiel 18:10-13:

**“If he fathers a son who is violent, a shedder of blood, who does any of these things 11 (though he himself did none of these things), who even eats upon the mountains, defiles his neighbor’s wife, 12 oppresses the poor and needy, commits robbery, does not restore the pledge, lifts up his eyes to the idols, commits abomination, 13 lends at interest, and takes profit; shall he then live? He shall not live. He has done all these abominations; he shall surely die; his blood shall be upon himself.**

Although the father is responsive to the Lord, the son is opposed to the Lord and his ways. The son practices wickedness in multiple ways, even though the father has done “none of these things.” The son did not learn wickedness from his father. The son, unlike the father, will not “surely live.” On the contrary, he will “surely die.” The son’s blood will be “upon himself,” not upon his father—meaning, the father will not share in the guilt of the son.

First, the Lord envisions a righteous man. Second, he envisions a righteous man who fathers an unrighteous son. Third, he envisions the unrighteous son himself becoming a father.

## The righteous son of the unrighteous man

Ezekiel 18:14-18:

**“Now suppose this man fathers a son who sees all the sins that his father has done; he sees, and does not do likewise: 15 he does not eat upon the mountains or lift up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, does not defile his neighbor’s wife, 16 does not oppress anyone, exacts no pledge, commits no robbery, but gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with a garment, 17 withholds his hand from iniquity, takes no interest or profit, obeys my rules, and walks in my statutes; he shall not die for his father’s iniquity; he shall surely live. 18 As for his father, because he practiced extortion, robbed his brother, and did what is not good among his people, behold, he shall die for his iniquity.**

Although the man in the third generation may seem to be disadvantaged by having an unrighteous father, he nevertheless takes a different path from his father. In fact, the Lord makes it seem as if it was an advantage for this man to have an unrighteous father. Twice the Lord notes that the third-generation man “sees” what his father has done, leaving the impression that seeing what resulted from his father’s choices helped him to choose otherwise. In any event, the third-generation man will not share in the guilt of his unrighteous father. In fact, like the first-generation man, he will “surely live.”

## See the sins

Is there something to be gained from understanding how you have been sinned against? Absolutely. Indeed, understand, as best as you can, what’s been done to you.

Don't sugarcoat anything. Don't minimize anything. Don't excuse anything. Trained counselors can be helpful in this way.

Ed and Kathy Woodhall, longtime members of our church, addressed a group of couples in our church a while back and told them their story. They spoke of some of the difficulties in their marriage, especially early on. They also said they sought help from a trained counselor. Ed, a former elder of our church, told the group, "Healthy couples get counseling."

One of the first things I do in premarital counseling is to ask each person to tell me about their parents. How did they treat you? How did they love you or not love you? What was their relationship like? What did you appreciate? What didn't you appreciate? I want them to be like the third-generation man, seeing the sins of their parents.

Notice, however, that the focus in the Ezekiel 18 scenario is not what's been done to any of the individuals. No, the focus is what the individuals themselves do regardless of what's been done to them. The third-generation man, who has seen the sins of his father, "does not do likewise." I want couples to see the sins of their parents, so that don't repeat the sins of their parents.

How do the exiles respond to the Lord's scenario?

## Just as sinful

### Ezekiel 18:19-20:

**"Yet you say, 'Why should not the son suffer for the iniquity of the father?' When the son has done what is just and right, and has been careful to observe all my statutes, he shall surely live. 20 The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself.**

The exiles respond to the Lord's scenario by saying, in so many words, "you've got it all wrong." They are not contending that a son should suffer for the sins of the father. No, they are contending that a son does suffer for the sins of the father—and they see themselves as such a son. Remember their proverb: "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." However, a son who suffers for the sins of his father

does not appear in the Lord's scenario. To the exiles, their proverb is true, and the Lord's scenario doesn't apply to them.

The Lord counters by invoking his scenario again, highlighting the third-generation man, who distanced himself from his father's unrighteous ways and instead practiced righteousness. Later, Ezekiel will accuse the exiles of defiling themselves "after the manner" of their fathers by worshiping other gods and sacrificing their children (Ezekiel 20:30-32).

Indeed, the fathers have eaten sour grapes, and so have the children. Indeed, the children's teeth have been set on edge, but the children are just as sinful as their fathers. Indeed, the exiles are nowhere in the Lord's scenario. They are an unrighteous son of an unrighteous father, even if they don't see themselves as such. Why doesn't the Lord include them in his scenario? Because he wants them to be the third-generation man!

True, the exile at least in part represents a judgment on prior unrighteous generations, but the men and women of this currently unrighteous generation can be different. They may think they're different, but as of yet, they are still practicing the unrighteousness of their fathers.

## Hope and warning

### Ezekiel 18:21-24:

**"But if a wicked person turns away from all his sins that he has committed and keeps all my statutes and does what is just and right, he shall surely live; he shall not die. 22 None of the transgressions that he has committed shall be remembered against him; for the righteousness that he has done he shall live. 23 Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord God, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live? 24 But when a righteous person turns away from his righteousness and does injustice and does the same abominations that the wicked person does, shall he live? None of the righteous deeds that he has done shall be remembered; for the treachery of which he is guilty and the sin he has committed, for them he shall die.**

The Lord now changes the scenario to individuals apart from any connection to prior or future generations. He now simply speaks of “a wicked person” and “a righteous person.” Whatever has happened in the past, whatever prior generations did, each individual in the current generation is either a wicked person or a righteous person. This has the effect of forcing individuals in the current generation to own up to their own responsibility before the Lord.

In this, there is hope for the wicked person and a warning for the righteous person. On the one hand, if the wicked person turns from his ways and practices righteousness, he will live. On the other hand, if a righteous person turns from his righteous ways and practices wickedness, he will die. What counts in each case is not the past but the present. Note that it’s not one righteous deed or one wicked deed that is determinative; it’s the orientation of one’s life. It’s not about the quantity of deeds, either good or bad; it’s about the direction of a person’s life.

## Unjust ways

**Ezekiel 18:25-29:**

**“Yet you say, ‘The way of the Lord is not just.’ Hear now, O house of Israel: Is my way not just? Is it not your ways that are not just? 26 When a righteous person turns away from his righteousness and does injustice, he shall die for it; for the injustice that he has done he shall die. 27 Again, when a wicked person turns away from the wickedness he has committed and does what is just and right, he shall save his life. 28 Because he considered and turned away from all the transgressions that he had committed, he shall surely live; he shall not die. 29 Yet the house of Israel says, ‘The way of the Lord is not just.’ O house of Israel, are my ways not just? Is it not your ways that are not just?”**

The exiles again dismiss the validity of the Lord’s scenario. In fact, they now accuse the Lord of injustice: “The way of the Lord is not just.” Evidently, they don’t think a wicked person should be let off the hook if he changes his ways for the better, nor do they think that a righteous person who changes his ways for the worse should lose credit for his past ways. They are standing in judgment of God.

The Lord, on the other hand, accuses the exiles of injustice: “Is it not your ways that are not just?” That’s the point: the exiles are not oriented toward the Lord.

They throw up theological arguments to justify their unjust ways and to convince themselves that their ways are somehow defensible, even just.

## The real problem

We, humans, tend to blame other people for our problems. We even tend to blame God, if we believe in him, for our problems. True, others, and even God, who is sovereign over others and over all the circumstances of our lives, may be at least in part responsible for our problems. But our problems are not the real problem. Our real problem is not the sins of others; our real problem is our own sins. We focus on the sins of others and blame them for our problems to turn our eyes away from what we don’t want to see: our own sins.

We focus on the speck in our brother’s eye to avert our gaze from the log in our own eye (Matthew 7:4). It takes a lot of concentration and time to find and remove a speck, doesn’t it? No wonder we can’t see the log!

And if we somehow come to acknowledge our sins, do we want to blame someone else for them? “I’m doing this because my parents mistreated me. Don’t blame me; blame them. Or blame God.” Taylor Swift’s latest release is an anthem for our times: “Look What You Made Me Do.”

We will go to great lengths to deny personal responsibility for our problems or sin. Why? Because we don’t want to confront hard truths about ourselves. Ultimately, we don’t want to feel bad about ourselves, and we don’t want to do the hard and painful work of self-confrontation.

Syndicated columnist Ruben Navarrette Jr. comments on what he sees as a growing tendency in the United States to blame others for our problems and to see ourselves as victims: “The Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave is now the Land of the Aggrieved and the Home of the Picked On . . . . When did it become a place where everyone pushes their own set of grievances? As an American, none of this makes sense. I thought we were made from heartier stock.”<sup>1</sup>

No, Ruben, it makes perfect sense. Heartier stock? We come from Adam and Eve—Adam, who blamed the woman for giving him the fruit, and Eve, who blamed the serpent for deceiving her. Adam even blamed God for giving him the woman (Genesis 3:12-13).

So, what’s to be done?

## Turn and live

Ezekiel 18:30-32:

**“Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways, declares the Lord God. Repent and turn from all your transgressions, lest iniquity be your ruin. 31 Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed, and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? 32 For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord God; so turn, and live.”**

The Lord will “therefore” judge Israel and the individuals within it: he will judge them not only because their ways are not just but also because they justify their unjust ways. In that the Lord will judge each individual “according to his ways,” he will judge justly, contrary to the accusations of the exiles.

Nevertheless, it’s not too late. In fact, the dialogue in the entire chapter is designed to lead the exiles to the place where they can hear and respond to verses 30-32. The Lord confronts them not to judge them. After all, he doesn’t want to judge them: “For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone.” On the contrary, he confronts them to save them from “ruin.” He confronts them because he takes pleasure when someone turns from his way so that he may live (Ezekiel 18:23).

In order to be saved, they must first “repent,” which involves turning away from their unjust ways, including their justification of their unjust ways. They must “cast away” their transgressions, as if they’re throwing out trash.

Second, they must “make” themselves a “new heart and a new spirit.” In two other places in the book of Ezekiel, the Lord says he will “give” Israel a new heart and a new spirit (Ezekiel 11:18-20, 36:26-27). True, only the Lord can do this kind of work in people, but people have to want the work. The imagery suggests that if they cast away their transgressions, if they throw out the trash, their hands will be free to do the work of making for themselves a new heart and a new spirit, which involves allowing God to give them a new heart and a new spirit. With a new heart and a new spirit, they will be responsive to the Lord. Ezekiel anticipates the new covenant, which was enacted by Christ, but in some way, it must have been available to the exiles.

The Lord’s final word, and what everything that the chapter is leading to, is this: “so turn and live”: experience the life of God. The Lord’s purpose is the transformation of the exilic community, who, in actuality, constitute the hope for God’s people and, indeed, the hope for the world.

## Look to Jesus

The apostle Paul says this of those who believe in Christ: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation” (2 Corinthians 5:17). We have been remade from heartier stock. What do we see from Christ? The writer of Hebrews observes:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted (Hebrews 12:1-3).

What’s the sin that “clings so closely” to us so that it hinders us? Note that Jesus “endured from sinners hostility against himself.” The sin that clings so closely to us, which hinders us in the race of faith, which can cause us to grow weary or fainthearted, is not our own sins, per se, but sins against us. To run the race, look to Jesus. Look not only to his example for inspiration (the way he ran the race without being hindered by the sins of others against him) but also, simply, by looking to him—to his face, even into his soul.

Peter says of Christ: “When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.”

Repent and turn from your transgressions: Stop blaming others for your problems. Stop blaming God for your problems. Stop crying, “That’s not fair!” Stop blaming others and God for your own sin. Stop singing “Look What You Made Me Do.” Stop justifying your unjust ways. Stop the blame game. At least for a moment. You can do that, can’t you? For a moment? You can take a break.

Then what do you do with that moment? Look. Look at what you haven't wanted to look at. You have played the blame game in order not to look at something, haven't you? But now that you have stopped blaming others and God, you can look. Look at what? Your own sin. Look at it. All this selfishness. All this envy. All this resentment. All this demandingness. All this lust. All this pride. All this idolatry. All this self-condemnation. Take a good, long, hard look. Take responsibility for it. It's your sin, no one else's.

Now, look to God. Indeed, it's your sin, but your soul belongs to God: you belong to him. He is your rightful owner. Where is he? He is in Jesus. He is Jesus. Look to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of your faith. What do you see? He looks pleased. What? Pleased? Oh, of course! He doesn't seek your ruin. He takes no pleasure in your demise. He takes pleasure in you. He wants life for you. Oh yes! He came that you "may have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). That's why he came. That's why he died. That's why he rose. That's why he gave the Spirit. He is full of grace and truth. He loves it when you're truthful, and when you're truthful, he pours out his grace. Look to Jesus. What do you see? You see love.

Your sin—whatever it is—is not a barrier between you and God. And do you know what? That's not fair! It's way better than fair!

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Navarrette Jr., Ruben. "When Did America Become a Nation of Victims?" *San Jose Mercury News*. 23 Aug 2017. <http://www.mercurynews.com/2017/08/23/navarrette-when-did-america-become-a-nation-of-victims/>. Accessed 15 Oct 2017