

EZEKIEL

Chapter 18

The Soul Who Sins Shall Die

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. 5 “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. 10 “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. 14 “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. 19 “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. 21 “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. 25 “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? 30 “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 theme that runs through Ezekiel 18 concerns inherited guilt. The proverb in this reading addresses the problems of self-pity, fatalism, and despair in the lives of the people. In the face of the Babylonian captivity and exile there are questions on the minds of the people. Whose fault was this? Was it their forefathers? Were the people of Ezekiel’s day supposed to pay the penalty for someone else’s sin? And if so, then why should they even bother following the way of God? Ezekiel explains why this generation has to pay for sins. It is not because they are paying for the sins of the fathers but rather because they are still sinning themselves. (CSB)

Theologically, this chapter ranks as one of the most important in the Book. Its overall theme is individual accountability before God. A person’s ultimate judgment comes when he must face the heavenly Judge at death. Ezekiel addresses the issue through three examples or case studies (vv 5–9; 10–13; 14–17). Ch 18 has affinities with chs 3; 33. (TLSB)

18:2 Ezekiel is not asking for a direct answer, but challenging his audience to defend their shallow attempt to deny their guilt. (TLSB)

this proverb. Cf. Jer 31:29, which indicates that the proverb arose first in Jerusalem. Jeremiah predicted the cessation of the proverb, and Ezekiel said its end had come. (CSB)

Jeremiah’s refutation is oriented more to the future time of the new covenant. (TLSB)

concerning the land of Israel. And about the fate of those who have suffered loss. (CSB)

The fathers ... on edge.† The proverb, though it expresses self-pity, fatalism and despair, and though it mocks the justice of God, had its origin in a false interpretation of corporate solidarity (see Ex 20:5; 34:7 and Ezekiel’s own words in chs. 16; 23). In La 5:7 the thought appears as a sincere confession. (CSB)

There is a tendency in each of us to blame someone else for our troubles. Ezekiel’s warning that Jerusalem would be punished because of the accumulated sins of the nation led the people to complain about being punished for the sins of others. They probably said it was all King Manasseh’s fault. He had been notorious for his “detestable sins” (2 Kings 21:10-15). (PBC)

The people accused God of being unfair. Behind their complaint was the idea they were not as guilty as their fathers had been and didn’t deserve what was about to happen. (PBC)

set on edge. The Hebrew for this phrase perhaps means “blunted” or “worn” (cf. Ecc 10:10), but it may refer to the sensation in the mouth when eating something bitter or sour. (CSB)

18:3 as I live. A divine oath, revealing God’s unalterable intention. It is used often in Ezekiel (5:11; 14:16, 18, 20; 16:48; 17:16, 19; 20:3, 31, 33; 33:11, 27; 34:8; 35:6, 11). (CSB)

God answered their objection. He created everyone. Each individual has a direct relationship with God. God expects each person to respond to his love with a life of love. (PBC)

18:4 *The soul who sins shall die.* Or “Only the soul . . .” Ezekiel spoke out against a false use the people were making of a doctrine of inherited guilt (perhaps based on a false understanding of Ex 20:5; 34:7). What follows is his description of three men, standing for three generations, who break the three/four-generation pattern. (CSB)

Summarizes ch 18. Since all souls were created by God, He guides their destinies and judges them. Death is the punishment for unrepentant sinners. Throughout ch. 18, life and death are used in their ultimate, beyond-this-world aspects. Gregory of Nyssa: “The death of the body consists in the extinction of the means of sensible perception, and in the dissolution of the body into its kindred elements: but ‘the soul that sinneth,’ he says, ‘it shall die.’ Now sin is nothing else than alienation from God, Who is the true and only life” (*NPNF* 2 5:126–27). Ambrose: “[The soul] dies to the Lord, through the weakness not of nature but of guilt. But this death is not the discharge from this life, but a fall through error” (*NPNF* 2 10:179). St. Bernard of Clairvaux: “Who, then, is righteous, except he who returns to God, who loves him, His meed of love? . . . And he receives by one and the same Spirit both the reason for thinking that he is loved and the power of returning love, lest the love of God for us should be left without return” (*SLSB*, p 157). (TLSB)

Everyone is responsible to the Lord for his way of life. The Lord punishes the sinner for his own sins. God does not punish anyone for someone else’s sin. (PBC)

soul. “Life” or “person,” not used here to distinguish spirit from body. (CSB)

18:5–9 Ezekiel’s first example. (TLSB)

18:5 *a man righteous.* † The first generation that does what is right and just. The following 15 commandments are partly ceremonial but are mostly moral injunctions. (CSB)

Follows from God’s declaring a person righteous by grace through faith. (TLSB)

does what is just and right. Ezekiel stresses righteous acts in the prophecy.

18:6–9 Major examples of what the Lord considered just and right. (TLSB)

18:6 Idolatry, evidenced by participation in pagan sacrificial meals, is condemned first. (TLSB)

eat at the mountain...idols. Eating meat sacrificed to idols on the high places (see 6:3; Hos 4:13). (CSB)

lift up his eyes. Seek help from. (CSB)

Trust in the false gods worshiped by apostate Israelites. (TLSB)

idols. The parallel clause, “. . . lift up his eyes to the fecal deities,” appears in no legal codes either, but it too is typically Ezekelian. It may refer more to “fine idolatry” (committed in the heart) in contrast to the more overt, public act of eating idolatrous sacrifices, mentioned first. “Lift up his eyes” implies looking for help, trusting in, and perhaps making supplication to the deities, rather than to the Creator and Redeemer. Similar phrases appear famously in Psalm 121:

I lift up my eyes to the mountains.
From where shall my help come?
My help is from Yahweh,
Maker of heaven and earth. (Ps 121:1–2) (CC)

defile. Adultery (condemned in Ex 20:14; Dt 22:22; Lev 18:20; 20:10) is here associated with a menstrual prohibition (see Lev 15:19–24; 18:19; 20:18), which is absent from the two listings that follow (cf. vv. 11, 15). (CSB)

Sexual transgressions: adultery and relations during a woman’s period. (TLSB)

18:7 *oppress*. The rich taking advantage of the poor. (CSB)

restores to the debtor. See Ex 22:26; Dt 24:12–13; Am 2:8. (CSB)

Collateral on a loan. (TLSB)

robbery. See the commandment against stealing in Ex 20:15; Dt 5:1. This is violent (“armed”) robbery rather than secret theft or burglary (see Lev 19:13). (CSB)

Implying violence or force. In contrast, the righteous person provides food and clothing to the needy. (TLSB)

gives bread to the hungry. See Dt 15:7–11; Mt 25:31–46. (CSB)

18:8 *lend at interest*. See 22:12; Ps 15:5; Pr 28:8. What is forbidden in Ex 22:25; Lev 25:35–37; Dt 23:19 is interest on loans to the needy. Dt 23:20 allows an Israelite to “charge a foreigner interest”; Ezekiel condemns usury. (Interest on modern commercial loans is a different matter.) (CSB)

May refer to inordinate profit on the loan (Hbr term for “interest” is similar to word for “bite”). There are three similar passages in the Books of Moses (Ex 22:25; Lv 25:36–37; Dt 23:20). God’s people should distinguish reasonable interest from usury. (TLSB)

18:9 *he is righteous; he will surely live*.† After the checklist of commandments has been gone over, the verdict is rendered (cf. Ps 15:5; 24:5). But a person is righteous before God only by faith in Christ. Works such as are listed in this passage demonstrate that faith exists. (CSB)

Righteousness is not merely adherence to some checklist, but a result of the right relation with God. (TLSB)

live. This is life as more than mere existence; it includes communion with God (see Ps 63:3; 73:27–28). (CSB)

18:10–13 In Ezekiel’s second case study, we meet a son who is a polar opposite of his father. The list of his wicked actions contrasts negatively to the father’s righteous actions. (TLSB)

18:10 *son who is violent*. Evil, second generation. About half (eight) of the previous commandments follow, but in a different order. (CSB)

18:13 *his blood shall be upon himself.* He is held responsible for his own sin (see Lev 20:9, 11–12, 16, 27). (CSB)

He has no one but himself to blame for his condemnation. The righteousness of the father cannot be inherited. (TLSB)

18:14–17 The third case study involves a righteous grandson. An example of this sequence (righteous grandfather, unrighteous father, and righteous son/grandson) is seen in the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah of Judah (2Ki 15:32–17:5; 18:1–20:21). (TLSB)

18:14 *this man.* Refers to the wicked father (vv 10–13). (TLSB)

a son. Righteous, third generation. Twelve commandments follow. (CSB)

18:17 *he shall not die for his father's iniquity.* The father's wickedness is no more inheritable than the grandfather's righteousness had been. The grandson had been righteous himself and so shall live. (TLSB)

18:18 Ezekiel glances back briefly at the unrighteous middle middle generation. Although each person is judged individually, the behavior of each member will affect the broader population. (TLSB)

18:19–20 The people are not yet convinced and imply that God does not judge fairly. They prefer to blame God rather than themselves. God answers by simply repeating His principle of individual answerability. (TLSB)

18:21–22 “Righteousness is faith in the heart. Furthermore, sins are redeemed by repentance. In other words, the obligation or guilt is removed because God forgives those who repent” (Ap V 142). (TLSB)

18:21 *But if a wicked man turns ... and keeps ... he shall surely live.* † Verses 21–29 teach that the power of guilt accumulated within a person's life can be overcome. (CSB)

He returns to the true God whom he had abandoned. His new life is characterized by specific creeds and deeds, and his whole life has a different orientation. (TLSB)

18:22 *None ... shall be remembered.* Chem: “Our righteousness consists in the fact that the Lord has not kept a record of our sins and does not impute them against us, as is explicitly stated in other passages of Scripture” (*LTh* 2:641). (TLSB)

for the righteousness that he has done he shall live. His new relation with God leads to a change in behavior (cf v 9). (TLSB)

18:23 It seems the people were not only accusing God of injustice but also of sadistic delight in punishing people. Just the opposite is true, as many scriptural passages affirm (cf Dt 30:15–20; 1Tm 2:4). Ter: “It was not merely that he might live the natural life that God had produced man, but that he should live virtuously, that is, in relation to God and to His law. Accordingly, God gave him (TLSB)

to live when he was formed into a living soul; but He charged him. (TLSB)

to live virtuously when he was required to obey a law. So also God shows that man was not constituted for death, by now wishing that he should be restored to life, preferring the sinner's repentance to his death” (*ANF* 3:303). (TLSB)

18:24 *But when a righteous person turns.* See Heb 2:3; 2Pe 2:20–22 for warnings against those who knowingly and willfully turn from righteousness. (CSB)

If someone who is righteous defects (and thus is no longer righteous), he will not live. His former righteous status is not remembered. God views things holistically. A person will be judged by his status before God at the moment of judgment. Cf Heb 9:27. (TLSB)

18:25 *the way of the Lord is not just* – It seems that no matter what God did, Ezekiel’s fellow countrymen criticized him as unjust for punishing them, for forgiving sinners, and for condemning the righteous man who turned away from the Lord. (PBC)

The people still protest that the Lord’s ways are not fair, but arbitrary or unpredictable. It is the other way around—God acts consistently according to His rules of justice, while people are fickle and reject God’s revelation. Athanasius: “A servant would not dare to say, because I worked yesterday, I will not work today; and considering the past [I] will do no work in the future; ... so let us daily abide firm in our discipline” (NPNF 2 4:201). (TLSB)

18:27 *he shall save his life.* As throughout ch 18, the life Ezekiel refers to seems to be eternal life. Temporal life or death may or may not be included. (TLSB)

18:30 *Therefore.* Concluding, summary oracle. (CSB)

every one. While the house of Israel as a whole was guilty, God’s judgment would be just and individual. (CSB)

Repent! Second call to repentance (see 14:6). (CSB)

Two forms of the Hbr “turn,” here repeated for emphasis. From the totality of Scripture, we know that this is possible only through the gracious gift of the Holy Spirit. (TLSB)

lest iniquity be your ruin. As the ESV note indicates, “ruin” is a free translation of “stumbling block,” i.e., lest there be another relapse into apostasy. (TLSB)

18:31 *get a new heart.* † What had been promised unconditionally (11:19; 36:26) is here portrayed as attainable but not inevitable (cf. Php 2:12 and 2:13). (CSB)

May be read as a condition: If you cast away ... then you will get a new heart and spirit. (Cf 36:26.) Chemnitz: “Just as there is an old and a new man, so the Law exercises control over the old man or his nature, coerces, crushes and mortifies it by outward discipline, punishments, and threats; but the consolation of the Gospel pertains to the new man and indeed produces the new man. For it is the ministration of renewal through which, when the man is outside he is brought low and when he is inside he is renewed from day to day” (LTh 2:664). (TLSB)

Hbr idiom is involved, which may be translated “get/acquire for yourselves” (cf 28:4; Dt 8:17; 2Sm 15:1; 1Ki 1:5). Sinners do not have a free will or ability to make their hearts new. (TLSB)

18:32 *I have no pleasure.* Verse 23 is echoed in this final, grand summary, called by some the most important message in the whole book of Ezekiel. (CSB)

Repeats v 23 as a conclusion and as an invitation to repent and live as God intended before the fall into sin. Through His Son, God has provided the means for such a change of heart. See notes, 11:19; 36:26. Cyprian: “While God is provoked with frequent, yea, with continual offences, He softens His indignation, and in patience waits for the day of retribution, once for all determined; and although He has revenge in His power, He prefers to keep patience for a long while, bearing, that is to say, mercifully, and putting off, so that, if it might be possible, the long protracted mischief may at some time be changed, and man, involved in the contagion of errors and crimes, may even though late be converted to God” (ANF 5:485). (TLSB)

turn and live – God doesn’t want people to be cut off from his blessings. He wants them to live. Man can’t get a new heart and spirit on his own. The call to repentance expresses the need to acknowledge and turn away from sin, and to turn to God as the source of forgiveness. Christianity is not a movement, an organization, or an attitude. It is a relationship between God and an individual person based on Jesus Christ the Savior from sin. To attempt to base our relationship with God on ourselves without Jesus is to tell God that we think Christ’s work is neither necessary nor beneficial. This chapter gives us a rich banquet of the gospel. Even when we think He is unfair for doing it. God still forgives. Our God, although just and willing to carry out His drastic threats and punishments, doesn’t like doing it. He would much rather bless and give life. (PBC)

Ch 18 God gives a clear, almost dogmatic, statement of how His justice operates. Life or death depends upon whether or not one believes and, as a result, lives out that faith. God severely condemns natural man’s tendency to justify himself on the basis of his own supposed righteousness, or to blame God (or someone else) for unfairness. Ezekiel also beautifully asserts God’s desire for everyone to be saved (“live”). • Lord, keep us steadfast in Christ’s righteousness, which has satisfied Your justice and has given us new lives. Amen. (TLSB)