

## **Ezekiel 18**

**Ezekiel 18:2 The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge**

### **Marion D. Hanks**

Ezekiel was a prophet during the captivity of Israel. He preached to a people to whom it was comforting to attribute their current problems to the sins of former generations. They were habituated to quoting a prophecy: "The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge." (Ezek. 18:2.)

There is, of course, a measure of truth in this proverb, as every parent or close observer of the human experience knows. Our children do suffer in many ways from our defections or derelictions, just as they prosper from our proper instruction and our love and good example.

As Ezekiel admonished Israel he spoke these words, recorded in the 18th chapter of Ezekiel:

The word of the Lord came unto me again, saying, What mean ye, that ye 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, saith the Lord God, ye shall not have occasion any more to use this proverb in Israel. (Ezek. 18:1-3.)

As I read the record, Ezekiel was not minimizing the sorrowful imposition of trouble in the life of a child who is deprived of the truth or misled by the faithlessness of a parent. Ezekiel was reemphasizing for Israel the great importance of individual responsibility before God and of God's impartiality in dealing with every man according to his own character. Hear these words of the Lord through the Prophet, immediately following his instruction that they no more use (or misuse) the proverb in Israel:

Behold, all souls are mine, as the soul of the father, so also the soul of the son is mine: the soul that sinneth, it shall die. (Vs. 4.)

Repeating those last words, "the soul that sinneth, it shall die," the Lord added:

The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son: the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him. (Vs. 20.)

Ezekiel then encouraged repentance and obedience, noting that the repentant sinner may avoid the eternal consequence of his deed through the forgiveness of the Lord. A wicked man who repents and becomes righteous will live. A righteous man who becomes wicked will die. Every man must stand before God and answer for his own choices and for his own character.

What Ezekiel said to ancient Israel I believe we must understand and apply to modern Israel. Where homes and hearts are sundered by the resentful or rebellious bad choices of a child who is accountable and has made his own stubborn decisions, which cross in their willfulness the purposes of the parents, God understands and does not condemn the honest parents.

Jeremiah quoted and refuted the same proverb:

In those days they shall say no more, The fathers have eaten a sour grape, and the children's teeth are set on edge.

But every one shall die for his own iniquity: every man that eateth the sour grape, his teeth shall be set on edge. (Jer. 31:29-30.) (*Conference Report*, April 1967, Afternoon Meeting 125.)

### **B. H. Roberts**

I hope you have followed me with patience in this reference to eugenics, because it leads to the consideration of a very great truth, one that is sometimes overlooked; and that is, parentage aside, environment aside, and inherited privileges aside-God holds each individual of every race and family responsible, individually, for the keeping of this law. And we must not forget, either, the operation of the great truth that "the Lord is no respecter of persons."

I have here a chapter of scripture I want to consider... I will advise you, therefore, as teachers, to read this whole chapter. It is the eighteenth chapter of Ezekiel. ("A Great Responsibility," *Improvement Era*, 1916, Vol. Xix. August, 1916 No. 10)

**Ezekiel 18:3 ye shall not have occasion any more to use this proverb in Israel**

"This scripture suggests that children need not merely replicate the sins of their fathers, but that each generation is held accountable for its own choices.

"Indeed, my experience in various church callings and in my profession as a family therapist has convinced me that God actively intervenes in some destructive lineages, assigning a valiant spirit to break the chain of destructiveness in such families. Although these children may suffer innocently as victims of violence, neglect, and exploitation, through the grace of God some find the strength to "metabolize" the poison within themselves, refusing to pass it on to future generations. Before them were generations of destructive pain; after them the line flows clear and pure. Their children and children's children will call them blessed.

"In suffering innocently that others might not suffer, such persons, in some degree, become as 'saviors on Mount Zion' by helping to bring salvation to a lineage.

"I have had the privilege of knowing many such individuals people whose backgrounds are full of incredible pain and humiliation. I think of a young woman who was repeatedly abused sexually by her father. When at last she gained the courage to tell her mother, the girl was angrily beaten and rejected by her.

"These experiences made the girl bitter and self-doubting. Yet, despite all odds, she has made peace with God and found a trustworthy husband with whom she is raising a righteous family. Moreover, she has dedicated her energies to helping other women with similar backgrounds eliminate the poison from their own lineages.

"I think of a young man whose mother died when he was twelve and whose father responded to that loss by locking his son in his room, then drinking and entertaining women in the house. When he would come to let the boy out, he would beat him senseless, sometimes breaking bones and causing concussions.

"As might be expected, the young man grew up full of confusion, self-hate, and resentment. Yet the Lord did not leave him so, but provided friends and opportunities for growth. Today, through a series of spiritually healing miracles, this young man is preparing for a temple marriage to a good woman.

Together they are committed to bringing children up in righteousness and gentleness and love.

"In a former era, the Lord sent a flood to destroy unworthy lineages. In this generation, it is my faith that he has sent numerous choice individuals to help purify them." (Carlfred Broderick, "I Have a Question," *Ensign*, Aug. 1986, 38)

### **Hyrum M. Smith**

In the time of Moses the Lord gave commandments to Israel, in which He told them they were to worship the Lord God, and none else. They were not to make unto themselves any other gods, nor bow down to the likenesses of anything in the heavens or in the earth; but Him only were they to worship; for, said He, "I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me, and shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me and keep my commandments." (Ex. 20:5) The Jews believed in the, law of heredity to a great extent, probably to a greater extent than they were justified; and by and by they took this commandment and crystalized it into a proverb which declared, "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." Then when rebuked for their sins and their abominations, they would turn and say, in effect, "Well, we are not to blame. It's not our fault. It is the sins of the fathers being visited upon the heads of the children, and surely God will not condemn us for the sins which we have inherited from our fathers, for our teeth have been set on edge by our fathers eating sour grapes." The Lord was very much displeased with this excuse of theirs, and He declared to Ezekiel, the prophet, "As I live, saith the Lord God, ye shall not have occasion any more to use this proverb in Israel." He then went on to tell the people through the prophet that He would require of every man and every woman in Israel an accounting for his or her own conduct and course in life, and every one should be judged according to the deeds done in the body. These Israelites seemed to forget that part of the commandment which said, that He would show mercy unto thousands of them that loved Him and kept His commandments.

Even in our day there is a disposition on the part of some to say, "Well, my father was addicted to strong drink;" "my father was given to profanity;" "in my father's family was found consumption, epilepsy, and other terrible diseases which are handed down from father to son," and offer that as an excuse for their own bad habits. We also hear it said frequently concerning the son of a man, "Well, you can't expect anything else; look at his father." Or, speaking of a daughter, "what can you expect from her when you know her mother?" And

so it goes; we condone some of the sins and the weaknesses of the flesh on the ground that they are inherited. He who feels that his parents are responsible for his inherent weaknesses and evil propensities, and thereby justifies himself, accuses his father of iniquity, and classes himself among the generations of those who hate the Lord. I should not like to be in this condition. Such a one ought to believe in and apply the saving principles of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which will save him from his sins and redeem him from error, and by means of this Gospel raise himself above all the sins and evil practices of his progenitors. This is what the Gospel will do. There is no law of heredity that is greater than the redeeming power and regenerating influences of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And it is intended to save the body as well as the spirit. If properly lived, there is no sin, no inherited evil-I care not what it is-that the power of God cannot relieve and eliminate from the soul of man. (*Conference Report*, April 1904, Afternoon Session 97)

### **Ezekiel 18:5 if a man be just, and do that which is lawful and right**

#### **Levi Edgar Young**

Throughout ancient Israel's time, the prophets stood against the world for righteousness and truth, and the necessity for righteous living was more truly theirs than any other people's. The sense of sin, the need of redemption, the lawlessness of human nature when it is not under subjection to the laws of God, the necessity for restraint of even natural powers and impulses are all postulates of the writings of the prophets. To this day, Hebraism stands for high moral discipline.

"Learn to do well; seek judgement, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow," says Isaiah. (Isa. 1:17) ("Israel's Life in Prophecy and Song," *Improvement Era*, 1943, Vol. XLvi. November, 1943. No. 11)

#### **Joseph Smith**

Righteousness is not that which men esteem holiness. That which the world [would] call righteousness I have not any regard for. To be righteous is to be just and merciful. (*Encyclopedia of Joseph Smith's Teachings*, edited by Larry E. Dahl and Donald Q. Cannon [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997], "Righteousness")

#### **James E. Faust**

What is success? Is it money? Is it achievement? Is it fame? Is it position? Is it dominion? The prophet Micah defined success as follows: "He hath shewed

thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?" (Micah 6:8.) ("Integrity, the Mother of Many Virtues," *Ensign*, May 1982, 48)

### **Joseph F. Smith**

I do not expect any victory, any triumph, anything to boast of, to come to the Latter-day Saints, except upon the principles of righteousness and of truth. Truth and righteousness will prevail and endure. If we will only continue to build upon the principles of righteousness, of truth, of justice, and of honor, I say to you there is no power beneath the celestial kingdom that can stay the progress of this work. And as this work shall progress, and shall gain power and influence among men, so the powers of the adversary and of darkness will diminish before the advancement and growth of this kingdom, until the kingdom of God, and not of men, will triumph. (*Gospel Doctrine: Selections from the Sermons and Writings of Joseph F. Smith*, compiled by John A. Widtsoe [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1939], 4)

### **Ezekiel 18:6 hath not eaten upon the mountains**

Idolatrous ceremonies were carried out "in the groves" upon the "high places" (1 Kgs. 14:23) meaning in the wooded areas where no one else could see. In seclusion, feasts dedicated to idols were carried out, as well as sexual rituals offensive to the Lord. Those who had "eaten upon the mountains" had eaten the sour grapes of idolatry and sexual sin.

### **Ezekiel 18:6 neither hath come near to a menstrous woman**

Under the Law of Moses, a man became unclean if he slept with a woman during her menstrual cycle (Lev. 18:19). The principle was taught to help the spiritually immature Israelites learn the difference between the clean and the unclean (Lev. 10:10).

### **Ezekiel 18:8 he that hath not given forth upon usury**

Thou shalt not lend upon usury to thy brother; usury of money, usury of victuals, usury of any thing that is lent upon usury: Unto a stranger thou mayest lend upon usury; but unto thy brother thou shalt not lend upon usury: that the LORD thy God may bless thee in all that thou settest thine hand to in the land whither thou goest to possess it. (Deut. 23:19-20)

Usury was to charge interest. The children of Israel were not to give out personal loans and expect any interest if loaned to another Israelite. Latter-day saints who understand this principle will not loan money to family members or members of the church with the expectation of receiving interest. Expecting interest of another church member is for those whose personal righteousness is beneath even the lesser law.

**Ezekiel 18:20 the son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son**

### **James E. Faust**

As caring parents we do the best we can. I am hopeful that in parenting God will judge at least partially by the intent of the parental hearts. Children have so much to learn. Parents need to teach their children so many things. They are commanded to teach their children specifically "the doctrine of repentance, faith in Christ the Son of the living God, and of baptism and the gift of the Holy Ghost by the laying on of the hands, when eight years old." (D&C 68:25.) But, having lived by these truths and having taught them in their home, parents cannot always ensure their children's good behavior. Said Ezekiel, "The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son." (Ezek. 18:20.)

Parents have the obligation to teach, not force, and having prayerfully and conscientiously taught, parents cannot be answerable for all their children's conduct. Obedient children do bring honor to their parents, but it is unfair to judge faithful parents by the actions of children who will not listen and follow. Parents do have the obligation to instruct, but children themselves have a responsibility to listen, to be obedient, and to perform as they have been taught. Parents are parents and usually serve their children more than the children serve their parents. To concerned parents I would paraphrase Winston Churchill: "Never give up, never give up, never, never, never." ("The Works of God," *Ensign*, Nov. 1984, 59-60)

**Ezekiel 18:22 all his transgressions... they shall not be mentioned unto him**

### **Neal A. Maxwell**

Ironically, some believe the Lord can forgive them, but they refuse to forgive themselves. We are further impeded at times simply because we have not really been taught why and how to repent.

As we do repent, however, special assurances await: "Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool." (Isa. 1:18.)

"All his transgressions ... shall not be mentioned unto him." (Ezek. 18:22.)

"I, the Lord, remember [their sins] no more"! (D&C 58:42.)  
("Repentance," *Ensign*, Nov. 1991, 32)

### **Neal A. Maxwell**

Isn't it interesting that the Lord says he will "not mention" our sins to us? How important, therefore, for us to be forgiving of each other and not to mention past errors! (*Ensign*, Apr. 1981, 60)

### **Ezekiel 18:23 Have I any pleasure at all that the wicked should die?**

#### **Spencer W. Kimball**

Should there be readers who think of the Lord as an angry, cruel God who brings vengeance on people for not complying with his laws, let them think again. He organized a plan which was natural—a cause-and-effect program. It is inconceivable that God would desire to punish or to see his children in suffering or pain or distress. He is a God of peace and tranquility. He offers joy and growth and happiness and peace. Through Ezekiel the Lord asks: "Have I any pleasure at all that the wicked should die? saith the Lord God: and not that he should return from his ways, and live?" (Ezek. 18:23.) And the Psalmist adds: "Let the wicked fall into their own nets." (Ps. 141:10.)

Yes, causes inevitably bring effects. One may avoid high tension wires, having been told they are dangerous, or he may touch them and suffer the consequences. Similarly, one may learn by obeying God's laws gracefully or he may learn by suffering. And this applies in any era—4000 B.C., 2000 B.C., in the Savior's time, or in the twentieth century. (*The Miracle of Forgiveness* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1969], chapter 10)

#### **Delbert L. Stapley**

It is unfortunate that so many have to learn the lessons of life the hard way, but what a great blessing it is to have an Eternal Father who cares enough to teach us, to bring us to repentance, and to forgive. Hear the words of encouragement as given to the prophet Ezekiel: "Have I any pleasure at all that the wicked should die? saith the Lord God: and not that he should return



from his ways, and live?" (Ezek. 18:23.) ("The Path to Eternal Glory," *Ensign*, July 1973, 100)

### **Mark E. Petersen**

The Lord came to save sinners. He taught that it is the sick who need the physician. Therefore, he invites the sick-as well as all others-to come unto him, repent, and be cleansed, sanctified, and saved in his kingdom. ("Salvation Comes through the Church," *Ensign*, July 1973, 111)

### **Ezekiel 18:25 ye say, The way of the Lord is not equal**

Can man say of God, "The way of the Lord is not equal"? One of the great ironies of mortality is when God's children accuse Him of being unfair. "That's not fair!" is the faithless whine of the spiritually immature. The sentiment is very common among who always see their neighbor's cookie as bigger than theirs.

God created man, yet man complains that God is unfair, that his ways are not equal, that his judgments aren't just. But God judges man, not the other way around. When man judges God, he has things backwards and upside down. He may as well wear his hat on his feet and his shoes on his head. God judges man-man has no right to judge God.

"Atheists argue that if there were a God with supreme knowledge, power, and goodness, he would not permit the overwhelming injustice and innocent suffering that has often characterized human history. They point to the many examples of violence, wars, genocides, and holocausts that a divine, powerful being should be able to prevent if he really existed and had concern for people on this planet. Christians (and the followers of many oriental religions) respond that mankind is responsible for most of the evils of the world. God gave Adam and Eve agency-the power to choose-and let them have dominion over all the earth, to rule and take care of it. (See Gen. 1:26.) So we humans-not God-are the ones who both cause and tolerate most of the suffering of our own race as we yield either to our own selfishness or to the temptations of Satan." (Victor L. Ludlow, *Principles and Practices of the Restored Gospel* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1992], 26)

"One frequently asked question that, without the benefit of revelation, remains a mystery is, 'Why do bad things happen to good people?' Often cast in the form of a bitter challenge, the question may be rephrased into an exclamation: If there were a God who really loved us and was involved with us, he wouldn't

let such a tragedy take place!" (Randy L. Bott, *The Doctrine and Covenants, a Book of Answers: The 25th Annual Sidney B. Sperry Symposium*, ed. by Leon R. Hartshorn, Dennis A. Wright, and Craig J. Ostler, [SLC: Deseret Book Co., 1996], 43)

### **Ezekiel 18:31 make you a new heart and a new spirit**

#### **Neal A. Maxwell**

Yes, there are real costs associated with meekness. A significant down payment must be made... Furthermore, our hearts will be broken in order that they might be rebuilt. As Ezekiel said, one's task is to "make you a new heart and a new spirit." (Ezek. 18:31.) There is no way that such dismantling, such erosion, such rebuilding can occur without real cost in pain, pride, adjustments, and even some dismay. (Ensign, Mar. 1983, 74)

#### **Neal A. Maxwell**

In all of these instances a new heart is to be made or a mighty change is to occur. And, further, if a heart is so set upon the things of the world, there is little hope for remodeling unless the wrongly set heart can first be broken. ("Teaching Opportunities from the Old Testament," *Ensign*, Apr. 1981, 59)

#### **Chieko Okazaki**

What is the gospel about if it is not about renewal? about putting off the old and putting on the new? about growing so that we match our eternal potential instead of being satisfied with our earthly limitations? As the apostle Paul explained, "Therefore if any man [or woman] be in Christ, he [or she] is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Isn't this what the Lord promises us when he holds out before us the joy of repenting, the hope of new covenants with him, and the rejoicing of being a new creature in Christ? (*Sanctuary* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1997], 97 - 98)