

A Victim of Sin

Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32 (NIV84)

¹ The word of the LORD came to me: ² "What do you people mean by quoting this proverb about the land of Israel: 'The fathers eat sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge'? ³ "As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, you will no longer quote this proverb in Israel. ⁴ For every living soul belongs to me, the father as well as the son—both alike belong to me. The soul who sins is the one who will die.

²⁵ "Yet you say, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' Hear, O house of Israel: Is my way unjust? Is it not your ways that are unjust? ²⁶ If a righteous man turns from his righteousness and commits sin, he will die for it; because of the sin he has committed he will die. ²⁷ But if a wicked man turns away from the wickedness he has committed and does what is just and right, he will save his life. ²⁸ Because he considers all the offenses he has committed and turns away from them, he will surely live; he will not die. ²⁹ Yet the house of Israel says, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' Are my ways unjust, O house of Israel? Is it not your ways that are unjust? ³⁰ "Therefore, O house of Israel, I will judge you, each one according to his ways, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. ³¹ Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, O house of Israel? ³² For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent and live!

The saying of Ezekiel's day was, "The fathers eat sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." (verse 2) What does that even mean? The father eats the sour grapes and his children's taste buds react. The father eats; the child's face puckers. What the parents did are now affecting the child.

The Jews used this proverb to express how unfairly God was treating them. It wasn't their fault that they, the elite of Jewish society, were taken away from Jerusalem and brought north to Babylon against their will. No, you can thank the generations before us for that. We are in Babylon, hearing from Ezekiel how Jerusalem will be destroyed, because of what King Manasseh did, a guy who ruled over our people in Jerusalem some 50 years earlier. He led our people into idol worship. He set up that statue of a false god in the LORD's holy temple. He shed innocent blood. God promised to wipe out Jerusalem because of what Manasseh did, not what we Jews did. We are being punished for what someone before our time did, and that's not fair. Your ways, God, are not just.

That's not fair! There's that phrase again. Last week, we heard "That's not fair!" from the workers in the vineyard and from the physical descendants of the Israelites. This week, the same accusation comes against God: "The way of the Lord is not just." (verse 25) The exiled Jews felt that their situation was the fault of someone else. For them to suffer for what their forefathers did was not right or proper or lawful in their opinion. It's not fair that children have to suffer through the effects of what their parents did. They saw themselves as victims of other people's sins.

We get it. We even agree with it. Ezekiel's audience was not just a core of hardened unbelievers. Actually, there are a whole lot of faithful Jews who were ripped from their homeland and brought to Babylon. We probably recognize a few of them. We know Daniel, as in Daniel in the lions' den Daniel. We know Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego – the three men in the fiery furnace. (If not, read Daniel 3 & 6 this week.) Ezekiel is preaching to both faithful and faithless Jews. The faithful feel that they are being punished for the actions of the faithless, that they were the victims of other people's sins and that's not fair.

With the recent news break of years of sexual harassment by Hollywood movie producer Harvey Weinstein, realize and acknowledge that there are people victimized by sin. How many "Me too" posts did you see on Twitter or Facebook in the past couple of weeks, that phrase which was meant to make it known how big of a problem sexual harassment and sexual assault it? Even if that wasn't your post or if you didn't see it, all of you have been victims of sin at some point in your life. You were sinned against. It's not your fault that you were sinned against, that people entertained sinful thoughts and carried them out on you. You may have been sinned against by your spouse, that they cheated on you. They committed the sin, but you suffer for it with a broken heart and broken trust. You suffer because your teenager who is quickly reaching legal adult age is making bad choices or you find yourself apologizing for your adult children because you believe it's your fault that they act this way.

Who's to blame? Who's the victim here? As the Jews complained to God that he is the one to blame because he is punishing them for what their previous generation did, that they are victims of their forefather's sins, did you pick up on the fact that God didn't rationalize or confirm why they were suffering. He didn't steer the blame to a certain individual or party like they did or even acknowledge that they had been victimized by sin. Why not? Because in the blame game, no one wins. Pinning the blame on someone else does not absolve you from your sin or your responsibility to God.

Instead of figuring out who's the victim and who's to blame like the Jews did, look at yourself. Take a hard, long look in the mirror of God's Word and ask yourself, "Where do I stand with God? Am I a righteous person who has turned from my righteousness and committed sin? Am I actively or passively turning away from God? Do I sin but blame other people for my sins?" If so, God says that you will die for the sin that *you* have committed. God's not telling you to look around and determine who's to blame for the sin you experience in life as if that will take away your sin. He wants you to examine yourself, to ask if you are right with God or if you have turned away from him. Why? Because "I will judge you, each one according to his ways, declares the Sovereign LORD." (verse 30)

God judges each and every single one of us individually. Yes, we are victims of sin. We have to live through the consequences of what other people have done against us. But God will not judge us based on how we have been victimized. He judges us for our own sins, and no one else's. God does not hold the sins of others against you.

While that is a relief to hear, then we stare into that mirror of God's Word a little longer asking ourselves what my sins are. The longer I look into that mirror, the more I realize how far short I have fallen of God's demands. I am not perfect. I may not commit outright gross sins, but I fall to temptations every day. I let evil thoughts about people fester. I entertain lustful fantasies. I try my best (most of the time), but I do not love the Lord my God with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength. He's not always my priority. I do not love my neighbor as myself. I'm selfish. I love me more. I do things for others to benefit me. Then again, sometimes I don't even love myself. I have plenty of sins that God will judge me for.

What do we do? We don't blame others or play the victim card, as much as that's what we are inclined to do. God says, "Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit." (verses 30,31) Repentance is turning away from sin. It's doing a 180, going on one path and then flipping a U-turn in life. It's recognizing that what I do is wrong; it is sin. I am sorry for this sin. God says, "The soul who sins is the one who will die." (verse 4) I know that for this sin, my sin, I deserve death – not just physical death but also spiritual. For this sin, I deserve the full flames of hell. But I want to change course. I want to repent, to turn and live.

How do we change course? How do we repent? How do we rid ourselves of all of the offenses we have committed and get a new heart and a new spirit? God works this in you. Ezekiel says in another place in his prophecy: "The Sovereign Lord says, 'I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.'" (Ezekiel 36:26) As King David prayed, "Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me." (Psalm 51:10)

God gives you a new heart and a new spirit. God the Holy Spirit does this through the means of his Word. He works that recognition of our own sin, that sorrow over our sin when we hear that the soul who sins is the one who will die. He gives us that desire to change, to course correct from our sinful ways to God's right ways. This new heart and new spirit is also given to us in Holy Baptism, that there God's Word combined with water makes me new, causes me to be born again with a new heart and a new spirit which is eager to serve God, turn from sin, and fight temptation.

God has made us a new creation! With this new heart and new spirit that he has given us, we repent. We turn from our sin. As God works this in us, he says, "If a wicked man turns away from the wickedness he has committed and does what is just and right, he will save his life. Because he considers all the offenses he has committed and turns away from them, he will surely live; he will not die." (verses 27-28) This new heart and new spirit causes us to give up our sin. And this sin no longer clings to us. We are not victims of it any longer because Jesus willingly took it on for us. By his perfect life and sacrifice, he has removed these sins from us. Jesus paid for those sins, and that makes us never want to return to them. Because God taken away our sins and given us new hearts and new spirits, we will live forever with him.

God has created in each of us a new heart and a new spirit. We are no longer victims of sin. With this new heart and new spirit, we recognize our sin. We take the blame for our sin. We take ownership of it but also turn from it. Because of what God has given us, we live a life of repentance, of constantly turning away from sin and wickedness and instead live for God. Amen.