

Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

Episode 126

Ezekiel 18

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Episode Summary

Ezekiel 18 focuses on one central idea: individual accountability for one's own sinfulness. The chapter opens with God's rejection of the pervasive Israelite idea that the suffering of one generation is the result of the sins of previous generations. The message God wants to communicate through the prophet is that the Israelites in captivity in Babylon and those about to suffer the destruction of Jerusalem have no one but themselves to blame. But yet the idea of corporate responsibility and the effects of sin being felt "unto the third and fourth generation" is found in the Torah. This episode discusses how individual and corporate responsibility are complementary, not contradictory.

Transcript

TS: Welcome to the Naked Bible Podcast, Episode 126: Ezekiel chapter 18. I'm the layman, Trey Stricklin, and he's the scholar, Dr. Michael Heiser. Hey Mike, how are you doing?

MH: I'm doing well, Trey, how about you?

TS: Pretty good; can't complain.

MH: Hey, we're coming up on the big trip to San Antonio!

TS: Yeah, it's gonna be fun, Mike! I think we're going to try to do a live Q&A episode in San Antonio next Saturday (November 19). We're going to aim for around 7 p.m. So 7 p.m. Saturday, November 19, in San Antonio, TX. Email me at treystricklin@gmail.com. The place is to be determined. I would love for you all to email me and let me know if you're interested and are going to actually be able to attend so I can find a location that will accommodate us. If we get enough people, we'll set up and do a live Q&A podcast. If only a few people, that's okay... we can still get together and meet up and hang out.

MH: So are you thinking about a restaurant or something like that?

TS: Something like that. I don't know, depends on how many people want to show up. They need to email me and tell me they want to attend. From there, I'll try to find some location to accommodate us. I'll email you back and let you know the exact location. Again, we're shooting for 7 p.m. Saturday, November 19. So that's going to be fun—our first... what should we call that? Our "Gettin' Nekked Party?" We want everybody to be fully clothed...

MH: Yeah, "Mike took a night out of the annual academic meetings for Biblical Studies and we did a 'Get Naked' night." That would be great, yeah.

TS: There you go. So we can call it our first...

MH: Let's have something a little more creative than that.

TS: The first Nekked Night.

MH: How about something that isn't like career-destroying? (laughter)

TS: Hey, if they can't handle it, that's fine. We've got your second career here on the internet, so don't worry about it. (laughter)

MH: For those who don't quite know what we're talking about, Trey and I are going to be in San Antonio because next week are the annual meetings of a bunch of scholarly societies for biblical studies and theology and religion and archaeology. All the societies have their annual meeting basically piggy-backing in the same week. It's always the week before Thanksgiving, so the 15th through the 22nd is the actual week that we'll be in San Antonio. But we figured, if people live near there and they want to come over and hang out for a little while, why not?

TS: And we have several interviews lined up. We're going to be on the show floor, so we'll be grabbing people just there on the conference floor, interviewing people. We plan on producing a handful of podcasts to come out of these conferences.

MH: People in the audience can pray that people's schedules work out. This is not a small event. This is not a trivial event in any way. During the course of the week, you're probably talking ten or twelve thousand people with PhD's. It's herding cats with PhD's is really what it amounts to. You're just running around during the week to four or five hotels. There's easily over a thousand papers being given. This is a huge event. It's the big annual event for these fields of study. It can be very haphazard. We have some people who have already arranged times with us. There's some bigger names.—for our audience, people that our audience will know, that we've referenced on the show. We're still trying

to work out scheduling with them, and of course a lot happens randomly at these events, too. Trey and I are going to be walking the floor a lot of times and just grabbing people to say, "Can you give us ten or fifteen minutes to talk about your book or whatever is important to you?" Something will come together. It's already coming together. But just pray that people's schedules open and that things work out and that we can get some of the people that I know that you'd like to hear from on the show.

5:00 **TS:** Okay, well this show, we're going to get back into Ezekiel.

MH: Yep. We're at Ezekiel 18. What I'm going to do to start off with... The chapter is not too long, so I'm going to read the whole chapter and then go back and cherry pick a few things that we need talk about or that will sort of seem obvious to talk about. So I'm reading from ESV. Again, this is Ezekiel 18. It says:

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’? ³As I live, declares the Lord God, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. ⁴Behold, 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— ⁶if 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, ⁹walks 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: ¹⁵he 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, ¹⁶does not oppress anyone, exacts no pledge, commits no robbery, but gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with a garment, ¹⁷withholds 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. ¹⁸As 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. ²⁰The 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. ²²None of the transgressions that he has committed shall be remembered against him; for the righteousness that he has done he shall live. ²³Have 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? ²⁴But 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? ²⁶When 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. ²⁷Again, when a wicked person turns away from the wickedness he has committed and does what is just and right, he shall save his life. ²⁸Because he considered and turned away from all the transgressions that he had committed, he shall surely live; he shall not

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die. ²⁹Yet 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. ³¹Cast 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? ³²For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord God; so turn, and live."

MH: Now, this is another famous chapter in the book of Ezekiel. It's famous for a very clear statement of individual responsibility. We should say at the outset that this isn't about... for instance, eternal life was never mentioned in here. This isn't like earning your way to heaven or something like this. Put it in its context. This is about the impending judgment on the people. They go back to this proverb in the first couple verses. I'll repeat those:

The word of the LORD came to me: ²"What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, [MH: and here's the proverb:] 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge'?

Now this was apparently a common proverbial statement in ancient Israel. Jeremiah also refers to it in Jeremiah 31:29, which says:

²⁹In those days they shall no longer say: "'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.'

So you have two prophets mention this. Again, this was apparently an axiom that people in ancient Israel not only heard, but used and put stock in. What it means is that the sufferings of one generation (in this case, the children) are caused by the sins of the previous generations (the fathers). What the past generation did produced an outcome for the new generation. The new generation is suffering and it's because of what their fathers did. And that was viewed as proverbial. "This is just the way it is, the way it should be. This is what we know." Here in this chapter, God is basically saying, "I don't want to hear that." And the reason he doesn't want to hear it is because God doesn't want excuses. God wants to convince them through Ezekiel is, "Look, the reason you're suffering is not because of what your fathers did. It's because of what *you* have done." This is a statement of individual responsibility, and it's really not put forth any clearer in the Hebrew Bible than in this particular chapter. Taylor, in his little Tyndale Old

Testament commentary has a couple sentences here I want to read because I think, again, he summarizes this pretty nicely:

Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel saw this [proverb] as a pernicious doctrine, because it inevitably led to a spirit of fatalism and irresponsibility. If the fault could really be laid at the door of a previous generation, those on whom the judgment was falling could reasonably shrug off any sense of sin and accuse God of injustice ('The way of the Lord is not just', verse 25).

They were using this as an excuse, and that's why God wants Ezekiel to address it. God just doesn't want to hear it. He's saying, "This is *not* the case. What's happened to you and what's going to happen in Jerusalem (to the people back home) is your fault and their own fault, it's not somebody else's fault."

And we should talk a little bit about this whole idea. Let's put it in the form of a question. We know that God is rejecting this proverbial statement ("because of what the fathers did, that's why we're under judgment here"). Is that proverb *unreasonable* in terms of biblical thinking? It actually isn't! It actually wasn't. And there are really two reasons for this. The notion of being punished for the sins of a previous generation (sins of the forefathers), you can find that in the Torah. Exodus 20:5 says:

⁵You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me...

So you can see that somebody can read Exodus 20:5 and come out with this idea.

15:00 Secondly, Ezekiel himself has sort of endorsed the idea earlier when he says (and how many times have we mentioned this in the course of the podcast as we've gone through Ezekiel as a book?)... He's constantly referring to the persistent and unrepentant idolatry of generations of Israelites that have gone before as being the cause of the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem, the cause of the exile.

Referencing back to Leviticus 26, God says, "This happens and then this other thing is going to happen." And so Ezekiel, on a number of occasions, has gone back to Leviticus 26 and said, "See, your fathers screwed up and this is why this is happening. So it's not an unreasonable thought for people to think. But, nevertheless, God says here in Ezekiel 18 that he doesn't want to hear this because it isn't true in this situation. That's the key thought. How do we understand this—what I would call an "apparent inconsistency?" (I don't think it is inconsistent and we're going to talk about why.) But how do we parse all this? A couple of things.

I would say first off, there's only an inconsistency here if the present generation wasn't idolatrous and was, in fact, innocent. But that's simply isn't the case. The preceding chapters in Ezekiel make it really, really clear that it wasn't just the generations of Israel in the past who were idolatrous. The preceding chapters make it clear that both the people back in Jerusalem and even the ones in Babylon are not innocent. The ones back in Jerusalem (and we've talked about this in a number of episodes, a number of chapters) are sitting there thinking, "Okay, we've been spared. We've had a couple waves of exile, but we're still here. We have divine favor. It's over and we're okay." They believe they've been spared and they don't clean up their act. They don't stop worshiping other gods. It's very clear.

In Ezekiel 14 (more recently) we saw that even the exiles in Ezekiel's presence were *still* doing some of these things. They were still in rebellion! So it's really not inconsistent. What God is trying to convince them of isn't, "Oh, Exodus 20:5 is wrong. I made a mistake there. I misspoke." No, that's not what he's saying. It's not to invalidate Exodus 20:5, it's to say, "Look, what's happening to you right now... you have nobody but yourself to blame." And that's why he goes into it in the chapter: "Look, if you're doing these horrible things and you repent, you'll live! I'll spare you if I see repentance." But, of course, the implication is, "I don't see any. It ain't happening."

So you go back and it's quite clear that they don't have an argument here. To reference Ezekiel 14 just to make it a little more clear, remember the group of elders who were sitting at Ezekiel's feet. They come, presumably, in the hope of hearing some oracle about how they're going to get out of here soon or maybe get good news from home. And, of course, that's not what they get. But the reference is to what the elders in Babylon were doing. They brought their idolatry with them.

Ezekiel 15 has the whole parable of the useless vine, referring to the people back in Jerusalem who are still there. The passage very plainly says, "You have acted faithlessly. You're worthless." Again, the useless vine. They don't have a claim. If anything, the remaining people in Jerusalem were even more guilty. You'd think after two waves of exile that they would sort of get the message. They'd get the hint and have a clue. Or they'd have a change of heart. But they don't. So God is saying, "Look, I don't want to hear this proverb anymore that I keep hearing. The soul that sins, *it* shall die because it hasn't repented. It's *your fault*, not the fault of the previous generation."

Taylor has a couple sentences that I think summarize this nicely:

The righteous man will live; the wicked will die. Everyone will be responsible to God for his own conduct. . . [MH: again, in the context of what's going on here]

As if to reinforce his assertion about the freedom of the individual, Ezekiel proceeds in verses 21ff. to hold out the possibility of a changed life. Individual judgment is never so final that it cannot be reversed by a change of heart and of conduct. The wicked man can repent and do righteously and live, and conversely the righteous man can revert to sinful ways and incur the judgment of death. In a word, the judgment will fall upon each man as it finds him.

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And so here they are. They've got this impending destruction that Ezekiel has been preaching about to them since the book opened—since we found them in their situation there by the River Chebar. The people have been barraged with this message: "You're going to get creamed. Bad stuff is going to happen. It's not over. Jerusalem and the temple are going to be destroyed." And Ezekiel goes into all these reasons for it. And then in the context of chapter 18 we hear this, "Well, what are we supposed to do? Our forefathers screwed up and now we're paying the bill." And he's like, "No, no, no, no, no. You're not going to have that excuse (because that's what it is). I don't want to hear it because you're thinking this is unjust. That is not the case. It's not unjust, it's not an injustice. This is, in fact, just because you have not repented. I'm giving you the chance." Again, we've seen from previous chapters that God *does* extend the chance, but at the same time there's little expectation that this is actually going to happen. But that's the situation. It's not unjust that this is happening. You can't pass the blame off on a previous generation or generations. "This is you, too."

In addition to saying this isn't inconsistent because the present generation in the context is not innocent, I would also say that the Torah doesn't just teach what's in Exodus 20:5 (this idea of the third and fourth generation and the sins of the previous generation affecting the later generations)... The Torah doesn't *only* teach that. It actually teaches *both* ideas: individual responsibility (accountability) and this third/fourth generation thing. So there may be a way to harmonize the ideas, since they're both in the Torah. We need to think about that. We do have passages like Exodus 20:5 about sins of the earlier generations and the subsequent generations—we got that idea. But there's also a rejection of the idea that children should be punished for the sins of their fathers. Deuteronomy 24:16 is pretty plain:

¹⁶“Fathers shall not be put to death because of their children, nor shall children be put to death because of their fathers. Each one shall be put to death for his own sin.

It's a very clear statement of individual responsibility that works both ways. So how do we parse all this? Block here, in his commentary, has a good statement. I want to throw this in:

Exod. 20:5 deals explicitly with the *divine* administration of justice, while Deut. 24:16 is designed to rein in abuses in *human* judgments. Humans are not to

punish innocent persons for the sins of their guilty fathers. Only those individually guilty of death penalty offense will be put to death. You don't punish an innocent child for the crimes of the parent.

And in a footnote, Block actually highlights an example of this in the Old Testament. In 2 Kings 14:5-6, we read this:

⁵And as soon as the royal power was firmly in his [Amaziah, son of Joash's] hand, he struck down his servants who had struck down the king his father.⁶But he did not put to death the children of the murderers, according to what is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, where the LORD commanded, [MH: here we go quoting Deuteronomy 4] "Fathers shall not be put to death because of their children, nor shall children be put to death because of their fathers. But each one shall die for his own sin."

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So you actually have an application of this idea in the recorded history that we have for the monarchy. So Block is saying that Exodus 25 and this thing about "I'm a jealous God and I'm going to visit the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me"... This is God's administration of justice. God is the one who gets to make this decision—this particular kind of judgment. People do not. There's individual accountability. So you have both of these things taught in the Torah. You might ask, "Is there a contradiction between them?" They would only be contradictory if Exodus 20:5 presumed that the subsequent generations were innocent themselves (we're back to the Ezekiel thing). The text of Exodus 20:5 never actually says that the later generation is innocent. They might be guilty like Ezekiel's audience was. Ezekiel's audience *is* the later generation (generations), and they're just as guilty as the ones that came before. So this might be in play, as well.

Another thought is, it would only be contradictory if the visiting of the iniquity of the fathers on the children means (catch the wording here) *judging* the children for the sins of the fathers. That's an important term. Exodus 20:5 might mean that what God is doing is not judging the innocent for the guilty, but it might mean not removing the children (the later generation) from harm's way or from the consequences of the sins of their fathers. Those are two different thoughts. One has God judging a later generation for the crimes of an earlier one. (I'm using the word "judging" there deliberately, like judging the innocent for the sins of somebody else.) But the language there ("visiting the iniquity upon the later generations") could just mean that God is allowing the consequences of the sins of the fathers to play out in the lives of later generations who didn't commit those sins, those crimes. That latter approach leaves room for the suffering of the innocent being a by-product of someone else's transgression. And that, frankly, is... We've all known how that works in real life. But that's different from being judged for someone else's transgression by a God who knows better—who knows you didn't do that.

I'll just use a personal illustration here. We've all probably got these. I can say that my mom was the victim in a variety of ways (I'm not going to get into the nitty-gritty details) of generational alcoholism. Not she herself, but who she married, their extended family, so on and so forth. That brought a lot of suffering into her life and *our* lives as kids. But she wasn't morally culpable. We all knew that. God knows that. But, nevertheless, she had to live under the consequences of the very bad decisions of other people. But God, again, is allowing that circumstance to happen. He's not intervening to stop it. But when God looks at my mom, he's not saying, "I'm judging you as though you were guilty. I'm considering you guilty even though you're not.." That's a totally different idea than cause and effect. We have individuals who reap what they sow, but then we have other individuals who are caught up with the effects of what people sow and what they reap in their own lives.

So that may be the best way to parse Exodus 20:5 in light of the Torah's other statements—and Deuteronomy 24:16 isn't the only one—but in light of the Torah's other statements about individual accountability and, of course, Ezekiel's own statement about individual accountability.

A related thought: If Deuteronomy 24:16 forbids humans from punishing the innocent for crimes they didn't commit, would God really have a lower standard for himself in Exodus 20:5? I don't think so. One can clearly see that it's certainly God's prerogative to providentially allow (that is, not intervene) someone to suffer the fall-out of someone else's sin (in my case, my mom and us), but does he have the prerogative to judge the innocent for the crimes of someone else? That is the very thing he forbids people from doing in Israel. So what I'm suggesting is if he forbids it to people (his own children in the nation of Israel), that's probably not the right way to read his own prerogative in Exodus 20. God would have little integrity if he did that.

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One last thought. I think it's interesting that Ezekiel actually adjusts the wording of Deuteronomy 24:16. Again, this is the verse about "don't punish the children for the crimes of the fathers"—this restriction on an abusive human system here. Ezekiel adjusts the wording in that verse and he transforms it from a judicial restraint (warning human authorities not to punish the innocent for the crimes of somebody else) to God's providential prerogative. Is this a subtle transition away from theocracy during the exile? I'm suggesting it might be.

Now look at the change in wording. Here's the line in Deuteronomy 24:16: "a person shall be put to death for his own sin." Ezekiel 18:4, though, says: "the soul who sins shall die." It doesn't say "shall be put to death" (by some human authority), but that person will die by some indefinite cause—Providence—the decision of God in Ezekiel 18 (of course, related to the events that are impending with the exile—Nebuchadnezzar and all that stuff). In other words, what Ezekiel does with Deuteronomy 24:16 is he leaves the outcome up to God: "the soul that

sins, it shall die." He takes that verse and takes it out of its judicial context and says, "This is up to God." We read the whole chapter in Ezekiel 18, and what does God say? "If you turn, if you repent, you'll live."

³²For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord God; so turn, and live."

It puts it in the lap of God to make the right decision through Providence, based upon the individual response. At the end of Ezekiel 18, God wants to be able to spare the innocent—the ones who turn from sin.

A last question (again, this would be one that many people probably think about when we read Ezekiel 18): What about corporate responsibility? Everybody would think of maybe Joshua 7—the Achan incident. Is this a contradiction to Ezekiel 18 and its emphasis on individual responsibility? I think we need to think a little bit about corporate responsibility. Typically, when we hear Joshua 7 with Achan preached, or we hear somebody talk about corporate responsibility, the way we process that is something like, "one person sins and then the people associated with him get punished." It's very easy to parse it that way. But we might consider another aspect of this (and maybe even the primary aspect in the Ancient Near Eastern culture), and that is that you have somebody sin, therefore the community must hold him responsible. And if it doesn't (or didn't), then we have a problem, then the effect of all this is going to widen. So salvation history—think about it—begins with God relating to humanity corporately (the Eden situation). There were only two people, but think in those terms.

I would say that nobody who takes the traditional view of Romans 5:12 (where God transfers the guilt of Adam and Eve to the rest of humanity)... If that's your theology, then you should not be offended by Joshua 7 and Achan's family getting punished with him. You'd have the same kind of view. So we might want to check our theology there. But, since I don't hold that view of Romans 5:12 (and of course, other people don't), we don't believe that Adam's *guilt* was transferred to everybody else because of what he did—it's about something else. If you're new to my take on Romans 5:12, go up to the website (drmsh.com) and just put in Romans 5:12 and you're going to find out what my view is. But Romans 5:12 (the way I parse it) means that everybody *dies*. Humanity is mortal. They're removed from Eden because of what Adam and Even did, but they're not *guilty*. They suffer the fall-out (pardon the pun); they suffer the consequences, but not because God charges them with guilt. It's just that they're caught up in what happened. They're affected by it, but it doesn't make them individually guilty for what somebody else did. You're guilty because of what you do, not because of what somebody else did. So we're back to that idea that the Torah teaches both.

So I think when we think about corporate responsibility, this actually works more than one direction, more than one way. Think about salvation with Jesus.

Because of what one person did, everybody *benefits* who believes. So it actually cuts both ways. I'm sort of getting into that to preface something that I'm going to bring into the discussion here, because I'm going to go to a particular article here in a moment. But I just want to read you an excerpt. This is from LBD and the article about "Sociology in the Old Testament." It talks about corporate responsibility. This is by a guy named William Raccah in the LBD. He says:

While modern people define themselves as individuals, Israelites were more likely to define themselves as members of a community of individuals sharing a common ancestry. The community was represented by each of its members, including those in its past, present, and future. As Robertson Smith states, "The members of one kindred looked on themselves as one living whole ... of which no member could be touched without all the members suffering." This communal solidarity meant that any community member could implicate the whole community either in blessing or punishment. . . . The term "corporate responsibility" likewise conveys the idea of a corporate society composed of members responsible both for themselves and the group.

So within corporate responsibility, there's this idea that the community needs to be helping, needs to be holding unrighteousness in check so that the innocent aren't affected by what the community might do. One could read the Achan story even as merciful, in that God could have just turned against the whole of the people—all the Israelites—for the sin of one. But he doesn't do that. Some scholars have noted along this trajectory that Exodus 20:5 (this thing about the third and fourth generations) might not be understood correctly, either. Here's Block again with a nice summary statement:

Although the statement is generally interpreted vertically, i.e., the punishment is carried out in successive generations, even after the guilty person has died, it may also be understood horizontally, according to which the "third and fourth generations" represent the maximum number of generations that live together in an extended family.

And Block himself actually applies that to the situation of Achan in Joshua 7. In other words, when God punishes Achan's family members—even his cattle are put to death because of what he does... The third and fourth generations idea applied to that situation might be essentially saying that God didn't apply the punishment to the whole community or people who would live afterwards, but to the extended family (the extended generations) of that family. That still offends our sensibilities because you wonder about the people among that group that didn't commit Achan's crime. And that's true; they didn't. But again, the whole thing about corporate responsibility cuts different ways. We can say it's not right, but is it right for God to *bless* a whole group for the behavior of one? He does do that plenty of times in the Old Testament.

I'm going to go to an article here by a guy named Joel Kaminsky. Kaminsky is probably the scholar (at least in our day) who has devoted the most time and effort to this whole concept of corporate responsibility. He has an article here (and I'll try to give access to it in the next newsletter for subscribers, but I can't just post this online) called "The Sins of the Fathers: A Theological Investigation of the Biblical Tension Between Corporate and Individualized Retribution." This is from a journal called *Judaism*, very simply. Kaminsky, again, has done a lot of work on this. Let me just read his opening paragraph. He says:

Many scholars maintain that the Hebrew Bible contains two opposing views of divine retribution: a superior one that portrays divine retribution as individualized and an inferior one that operates on a principle of corporate responsibility. Furthermore, the apparent tensions between those biblical texts that stress the communal aspects of punishment and those that stress the individual aspects are often resolved by placing the various biblical statements surrounding divine retribution into a chronological framework. This viewpoint understands the growth of individualism within the biblical corpus as an evolutionary movement in which the individual slowly emerges from the murky depths of communal obscurity and gradually gains autonomy. In its most benign form this bias leads scholars to date materials [MH: in the Hebrew Bible] that have no clear historical markers simply on the basis of their use of individualistic language.

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So that's his first paragraph. He's saying that there's this assumption in scholarship that the individual approach in Ezekiel 18 is just morally superior, theologically superior, to the corporate approach. And modern-day scholars are so convinced by this that they'll actually use it arbitrarily to date biblical texts. Kaminsky is going to say that's a problem. His article is trying to basically discuss corporate responsibility as not being ethically or morally inferior. It has a role to play, and it cuts both ways. So if we're going to judge the approach as inferior, what about when masses benefit from the righteous behavior of someone? Do they *deserve* that? You'd have to say to be consistent, "No, they don't deserve that. That's not right, either." But, again, the very people who say that ultimately are beneficiaries of it—especially if you're a Christian. So what Kaminsky's trying to do here is give corporate responsibility its own day, give it a hearing here. He writes (later in the same article):

The modern emphasis on individual rights over against the claims of the larger community has often informed interpretations of many biblical passages that address the relationship between the individual and the community in ancient Israel. These have tended to focus on biblical passages in which a ritual violation is followed by some type of corporate punishment such as occurs in Joshua 7 and 2 Samuel 21:1-14. Both these passages include instances of inter-generational retribution in which descendants suffer the consequences of their father's or

grandfather's sin. Scholars have often viewed these texts as advocating a set of primitive ideas that were eventually superseded by a superior, more individualized religious impulse.

And here he brings up Ezekiel 18. So a lot of this article is actually about Ezekiel 18. He writes elsewhere:

It should be noted that the previously mentioned secularized evolutionism is sometimes compounded by a specifically Christian supersessionism. In this Christian version, the content of the Hebrew Bible is seen as an imperfect expression of ideas that reached fruition in the New Testament period. Thus certain scholars have characterized the religion and morality of the Hebrew Bible as inferior to that of the New Testament.

Isn't that interesting? I can think of very specific instances where I've heard that. Kaminsky again:

Although recent scholarship is generally more cautious and nuanced than earlier scholarship in its attempt to grapple with both the corporate and the individualized elements of the Hebrew Bible, it is still infected by the individualist bias. The tendency to view passages such as Deuteronomy 24:16, Jeremiah 31:29-30, and Ezekiel 18 as rejecting these older corporate ideas and thus as signaling a major turning point in Israel's theological understanding of the individual and his relationships to God persists.

He goes on the article to critique these ideas and some scholars and their publications who have sought to defend them. He thinks they're problematic. He thinks this approach is misguided (to see the Old Testament corporate responsibility ethic as being inferior). He doesn't buy it, which is one reason I think the article is important. He writes later in the article:

The biblical tradition stresses two major aspects of God: justice and mercy. The Bible gives attention to both, but clearly, divine mercy ultimately triumphs. Theologically speaking, if this were not so, it is unlikely humans would continue to exist (Genesis 8:21, Psalms 52:3, 130:3, and Ezekiel 20:44). Theologians and biblical scholars who celebrate Ezekiel 18 do so precisely because they believe it proclaims both God's justice and his mercy. According to Ezekiel 18, God is just, insofar as he punishes only the guilty and never the innocent; he is merciful inasmuch as he allows even the guilty to repent of their evil behavior. Upon initial reflection this line of thinking seems quite compelling. But once one begins to think about this theology at greater length certain problems emerge.

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To begin with, this theology of retribution does not accord with our common human experience. This point is eloquently made by Klaus Koch in his discussion of Ezekiel 18. "It may seem right and just that each individual alone should bear the fruits of what he does; but none the less, general human experience tells us that children also have to suffer when their parents suffer. The ties between the generations, and collective liability, cannot be entirely abrogated, even in a nation. (We only have to remember, for example, the intensive discussion that went on after 1945 about the collective guilt of all Germans; or today's anxiety about the burdens laid on future generations by our present treatment of the environment.) If we take this everyday experience into account, does not Ezekiel go too far?" [MH: That's the end of the quote from Koch.] Here Koch is only mentioning the intense connection between the various individuals in different generations. The theological difficulty is exacerbated when one goes further, as Ezekiel does in chapter 18, and advocates that a person's past deeds will have no effect on his current state (vv. 21-32). Ezekiel 18 introduces this radical individualizing of retribution to help the nation see that there is room for repentance, but it is clear that if one takes this theology to its extreme, it no longer speaks to our experience.

[MH: skipping down] A good way to sharpen this point is to compare the individualist views of Ezekiel 18 to the more corporate theology espoused in Genesis 18:16-33, in which one finds the argument between God and Abraham over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah.

So I'm just going to summarize what Kaminsky says after that. If you compare the individualism that people sort of tend to like (you get punished, you get judged, for what you do—your individual sins)... They like that, but then if they go to Genesis 18, you get the opposite picture. In Genesis 18, Abraham appeals to God's sense of justice: "If you can find just a handful of righteous people in Sodom, will you spare the city?" and that whole idea. It's, in fact, arguing for mercy—and God listens. Abraham wants a whole city to survive because of a handful of righteous people, and God accepts the reason. We know the story—God accepts the reasoning. In that sense, you have the corporate thing that's morally superior (at least that's how most people today would look at it).

So this is what Kaminsky's article does. It goes through the individual and the corporate responsibility (both of those things) and shows that both of these things are present in Scripture. This is about God's own determination of justice and mercy, so we can't just throw out the corporate thinking of the Old Testament—because if you throw it out, you're throwing out a lot of mercy. (laughs) You're throwing out the chance of mercy. And frankly, as a Christian you should think about what you're doing.

As we wrap up, the point here is that the Bible holds both individual and corporate responsibility in tension. It isn't just corporate judgment that is in view (like with the Achan story). It's also corporate mercy that's at stake. God could just wash his hands of the whole affair (humanity) in light of his demand for perfection. But he doesn't do that. He never does that. He may or may not exercise corporate judgment (as in the case of Joshua 7). We have to assume God had his reasons for doing that; we're not told in the narrative whether Achan was aided and abetted and all that stuff. And again, people say, "Well, it wasn't that because the cattle got punished, too." Okay, but let's be realistic. That doesn't exclude the possibility that there were others guilty in the mix. Of course, you could have others that were innocent. God could have judged the entire community, but he doesn't. Maybe the right way to read it is he does limit the judgment to the third and fourth generation horizontally, and God is actually merciful but he has to make the point so that the community takes the responsibility to guard itself and its members against sin. Maybe that's how we should read that.

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Again, you can't just throw out the corporate idea because God certainly exercised corporate mercy to his own children (Israel) and to his own children (us—the Church) when he transferred the righteousness of one individual (Jesus) to sinners. So if you want to throw out the whole corporate view that is so prevalent in the Hebrew Bible (and dare I say “biblical thinking”), you're probably only thinking of Achan or one of these other examples. There aren't many of them, but they're there. But if you throw it out, look at what you lose! (laughs) It's pretty telling.

So maybe we should try to view these things in light of God's wish—God's desire—to not just judge a group for the sins of one (to take a skewed perspective), but maybe God (as in Ezekiel 18) says, "Look, why will you die, O house of Israel?" The message that you can still repent is going out to a group, not just to one or two people, and it has gone out to a group—both in Ezekiel's generation and generations before that in terms of the prophets. God didn't just sneak this positive message in: (mumbles) "If you repent then you'll live, but don't tell anybody." No, it's been spread abroad. He says:

Why will you die, O house of Israel? ³²For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord GOD; so turn, and live."

He's holding it out there and the message... yeah, it's individualistic here in Ezekiel 18, but guess what? *Lots* of individuals heard it. It was corporately given out. But it's only going to matter in terms of the individual response. Again, there are some people who just want to take a passage like this and the thing in Exodus 20 and villainize God, and they forget the corporate mercy. They forget the wideness of the offer to individuals to repent and live. And we just need to be

careful that we're not picking and choosing one little aspect of a much bigger picture when we land somewhere in the text.

TS: All right, Mike. That was a good one. There's lots to think about on that one. It's a pretty heavy one! I don't know if people know how to parse chapter 18.

MH: I think kind of a good rule of thumb is when we run into stuff like that, remember that corporate mercy is actually more prevalent in the Bible than these corporate judgment kind of things. And so that's what we need to remind ourselves of. God has acted more in the direction of mercy than he has in the other direction.

TS: All right, Mike, switching gears here... How's the Biblewordnerd coming?

MH: Oh, Biblewordnerd has had a good response. I talked to Johnny a couple times recently and the course itself is about to become live. We had a really good response to this precursor period, if that's any indication. I told Johnny yesterday by email, "Once we can start pulling extracts out of it and you give people a little glimpse of what it is that the course contains, people are just going to immediately see the value in it." So he's real happy. I think it's a good start. This is a unique tool, a unique course. If you really want something useful that isn't going to take you a semester or a week—just a couple hours of your time to really learn an important skill (and again, you don't have to buy lots of things to practice those skills you're learning)... There's nothing else like this. Trust us, we've looked. We've talked about this for years. So this is the kind of thing that... We're coming up on Christmas and this would be a great Christmas gift. It's a great individual thing. It's practical. It's compact. It's useful, and it can be replicated by people. I'm just hoping more people take advantage of it.

TS: Sounds good. Looking forward to it. Next week, Mike, we're going to be doing our 17th Q&A episode.

MH: Wow. (laughing) Every time I hear the number, I'm just kind of overwhelmed by that.

TS: It keeps climbing up! And then probably after that I'm going to pepper the week during Thanksgiving as I get through editing all these interviews we have during the conference. So I'm going to probably be releasing those daily, depending on how many we get. I'm not going to make you one big long episode. I may break it down into more easily digestible lengths. Send me an email at treystriicklin@gmail.com and let me know if you're going to be attending our Saturday event in San Antonio, Texas at 7 p.m., location to be determined.

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All right, well I'm looking forward to meeting everybody. And just want to thank everybody for listening to the Naked Bible Podcast. God bless.

