

# EZEKIEL

## Hard to Heart

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### *“When Proverbs Go Sour”*

18:1-32

An idiom is an expression whose meaning cannot be deduced from the literal definitions of the words that make up the expression. In other words you couldn't look up the meaning of each word in a dictionary and comprehend the meaning of the sentence.

Idioms are often deeply ingrained into our culture, going back many generations and used without thinking. They are often funny or nonsensical when translated into another language.

I found a list of common English idioms translated into various languages:

- “Water under the bridge” translates in Portuguese to “Past waters don't power mills.”
- “Money doesn't grow on trees” translates in Arabic to “The sky doesn't throw chicks.”
- “He's not the sharpest tool in the shed” in Spanish translates to “He doesn't have two fingers of forehead.”
- “To sleep in” translates in French to “Pillow failure.”

I think you get the idea.

In our text we're going to encounter something like that only it's called a proverbial saying. It's right at the beginning, in verse two.

Ezekiel 18:1 The word of the Lord came to me again, saying,

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18:1-32

*“When Proverbs Go Sour”*

Ezekiel 18:2 "What do you mean when you use this proverb concerning the land of Israel, saying: 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, And the children's teeth are set on edge'?"

Forget our modern use of the expressions “sour grapes” and “set your teeth on edge.” These phrases had a different meaning for the Jews.

The Hebrew for “set your teeth on edge” seems to mean something like, *makes your mouth tingle*. “Sour grapes” wasn’t an idiom at all. Think of “sour grapes” as just that - **grapes that had soured!**

Some people like sour tasting foods. The proverb is communicating that the children can taste what their parents have consumed.

In the context in which they were using it the proverb was intended to communicate that they were being judged by God for the things that their parents had done. They were thus accusing God of being unfair.

They may have had Exodus 20:5 in mind.

Exodus 20:4 "You shall not make for yourself a carved image - any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth;

Exodus 20:5 you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me,

Is that what God does? Is He unfair?

The point of these verses in Exodus was that the effects of sin are serious and long-lasting, not that God punishes the innocent for their ancestors’ evil ways.

How do we know that is the correct interpretation? Because of what the Lord said next to Ezekiel.

Ezekiel 18:3 "As I live," says the Lord God, "you shall no longer use this proverb in Israel.

“You’re wrong,” God said. “Visiting iniquity upon the children” did not mean that He punished them unfairly for their father’s sins. Nor did it mean they had no choice but to sin.

Here is what was happening in Israel. Their father’s had sinned and it brought upon their descendants the consequences of the seventy-year Babylonian captivity.

But within those consequences each Jew was being held personally responsible for their own actions.

That makes sense, does it not? On a national level I always hear politicians talk about the effect their decisions today will have on future generations of Americans. It’s inevitable that there be consequences, good or bad.

But each generation still must take responsibility for their own individual actions in whatever situation they find themselves.

In the case of the Jews personal responsibility was going to be a matter of life and death.

God gave a series of for instances to show what He was doing among them. It started with this important statement.

Ezekiel 18:4 "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.

“Souls” in this context means *persons*. In this section we are *not* talking about eternal life but the quality of physical life on the earth.

God was dealing with them on the basis of the Mosaic Covenant. The covenant God made with Moses promised physical blessings for obedience to the Law and physical curses for disobedience to the Law.

The covenant was made with people who had already been delivered and who already had a relationship with God. The Law did not save them, but it did tell them how to live.

When God said, “the soul of the father As well as the soul of the son is Mine,” He meant that He was dealing with them as individuals who were responsible for their own actions. “The soul who sins,” whether it be father or son, would “die” physically as a punishment under the terms of the Mosaic Covenant. No son would die for the sins of his father.

In verses five through nine God presents a just father:

Ezekiel 18:5 But if a man is just And does what is lawful and right;  
Ezekiel 18:6 If he has not eaten on the mountains, Nor lifted up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, Nor defiled his neighbor's wife, Nor approached a woman during her impurity;  
Ezekiel 18:7 If he has not oppressed anyone, But has restored to the debtor his pledge; Has robbed no one by violence, But has given his bread to the hungry And covered the naked with clothing;  
Ezekiel 18:8 If he has not exacted usury Nor taken any increase, But has withdrawn his hand from iniquity And executed true judgment between man and man;  
Ezekiel 18:9 If he has walked in My statutes - And kept My judgments faithfully - He is just; He shall surely live!" Says the Lord God.

When you read the word “just” in this chapter it is not describing the theological concept of justification by faith. God was not distinguishing between saved and unsaved. He was describing the right way of living on earth according to the Law of God.

All of the things listed in verses five through nine can be found somewhere in the books of Exodus or Deuteronomy or Leviticus as the conduct of the man seeking to live by the Law of God - seeking to please God.

This just man “shall live.” In other words, though he may suffer captivity, his life will not be required as a punishment for his sins.

Next God described this just man’s unjust son.

Ezekiel 18:10 "If he begets a son who is a robber Or a shedder of blood, Who does any of these things

Ezekiel 18:11 And does none of those duties, But has eaten on the mountains Or defiled his neighbor's wife;

Ezekiel 18:12 If he has oppressed the poor and needy, Robbed by violence, Not restored the pledge, Lifted his eyes to the idols, Or committed abomination;

Ezekiel 18:13 If he has exacted usury Or taken increase - Shall he then live? He shall not live! If he has done any of these abominations, He shall surely die; His blood shall be upon him.

The unjust son, because he sins willfully against the Law of God, will suffer the punishment under the Law, the penalty of physical death.

Next God described this unjust man's just son!

Ezekiel 18:14 "If, however, he begets a son Who sees all the sins which his father has done, And considers but does not do likewise;

Ezekiel 18:15 Who has not eaten on the mountains, Nor lifted his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, Nor defiled his neighbor's wife;

Ezekiel 18:16 Has not oppressed anyone, Nor withheld a pledge, Nor robbed by violence, But has given his bread to the hungry And covered the naked with clothing;

Ezekiel 18:17 Who has withdrawn his hand from the poor And not received usury or increase, But has executed My judgments And walked in My statutes He shall not die for the iniquity of his father; He shall surely live!

Ezekiel 18:18 "As for his father, Because he cruelly oppressed, Robbed his brother by violence, And did what is not good among his people, Behold, he shall die for his iniquity.

Bottom line: God was not unfairly punishing the Jews for the sins of their fathers. Though their national circumstances were the result of their fathers' sins, God was dealing with them as individuals within those circumstances.

Ezekiel 18:19 "Yet you say, 'Why should the son not bear the guilt of the father?' Because the son has done what is lawful and right, and has kept all My statutes and observed them, he shall surely live.

Ezekiel 18:20 The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not bear the guilt of the father, nor the father bear the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself.

We'll talk a little more about personal responsibility in a moment. They are spoken here to correct the Jews. They had a wrong view of God's justice and, thus, a wrong view of God.

We could not know God except for His revelation of Himself. Whatever He has revealed is true - no matter what I might think or feel to the contrary.

Here is how important it is to take God at His word. Some years ago a Jewish rabbi wrote a book titled, *When Bad things Happen to Good People*. It was his attempt to reconcile the fact that God is love but that people suffer. He concluded that God must be either love or all powerful but that if He allowed good people to suffer He was not both.

But what good is a God Who loves me but can't ultimately help me? He's not God!

We take God at His word and work through the details. As we do we see no contradictions only deeper layers of His love.

In the next illustration God moves away from fathers and sons and gives a generalization.

Ezekiel 18:21 "But if a wicked man turns from all his sins which he has committed, keeps all My statutes, and does what is lawful and right, he shall surely live; he shall not die.

Ezekiel 18:22 None of the transgressions which he has committed shall be remembered against him; because of the righteousness which he has done, he shall live.

Remember that we are talking about the temporal, earthly destiny of men - not their salvation. A wicked man who repented could yet be spared physical death. It was up to him.

Ezekiel 18:23 Do I have any pleasure at all that the wicked should die?" says the Lord God, "and not that he should turn from his ways and live?"

God takes no pleasure in sentencing wicked men to physical death. He would rather they repent and enjoy life.

Ezekiel 18:24 "But when a righteous man turns away from his righteousness and commits iniquity, and does according to all the abominations that the wicked man does, shall he live? All the righteousness which he has done shall not be remembered; because of the unfaithfulness of which he is guilty and the sin which he has committed, because of them he shall die.

God is fair under the Law. This doesn't mean that every wicked person will be killed immediately, or that no righteous person will die young. It means that with regard to blessings and cursings prescribed by the Mosaic Covenant God holds each person individually responsible.

Ezekiel 18:25 "Yet you say, 'The way of the Lord is not fair.' Hear now, O house of Israel, is it not My way which is fair, and your ways which are not fair?"

God holds a man personally responsible for his actions. Though we are talking specifically about the blessings and curses of the Mosaic Covenant, the fact of personal responsibility is true no matter what covenant you find yourself under.

Ezekiel 18:26 When a righteous man turns away from his righteousness, commits iniquity, and dies in it, it is because of the iniquity which he has done that he dies.

Ezekiel 18:27 Again, when a wicked man turns away from the wickedness which he committed, and does what is lawful and right, he preserves himself alive.

Ezekiel 18:28 Because he considers and turns away from all the transgressions which he committed, he shall surely live; he shall not die.

These were super-important considerations to the Jews being addressed. The Jews in Jerusalem were about to be overrun by Nebuchadnezzar's forces. Death and life literally were at stake.

How could the just escape? Fast forward to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD. What happened to the Christians? Early Christian historians Eusebius and Epiphanius claim that prior to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans the Jerusalem Christians fled to the Decapolis city of Pella.

Ezekiel 18:29 Yet the house of Israel says, 'The way of the Lord is not fair.' O house of Israel, is it not My ways which are fair, and your ways which are not fair?

Ezekiel 18:30 "Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways," says the Lord God. "Repent, and turn from all your transgressions, so that iniquity will not be your ruin.

Ezekiel 18:31 Cast away from you all the transgressions which you have committed, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit. For why should you die, O house of Israel?

Ezekiel 18:32 For I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies," says the Lord God. "Therefore turn and live!"

*Talk about belaboring a point!* How many times has this now been repeated?

When the Lord mentions the “new heart and... new spirit” He was reiterating what was true even under the Law. He was never interested in mere outward obedience but real obedience from the motive of a loving heart.

These people deserved the judgment that was coming. Sure, they were subject to Babylon because of their ancestors. But in Babylon, had they turned from their own sin to serve the Lord, they would have prospered.

Indeed, many would prosper, as Daniel did.

Although these verses are only addressing the physical aspects of life and death under the Law, they reveal something important.

It is the nature of God to hold a person responsible for their actions. That being true, we understand that there must be free will. Without free will there could be no personal responsibility.

As Norman Geisler puts it,

Sound reason demands that there is no responsibility where there is no ability to respond. It is not rational to hold someone responsible when they could not have responded. And God is not irrational... Both Scripture and good reason inform us that... human beings have the power of free choice.



Here is another way of looking at it. Let's say you come to the conclusion that out from all of humanity, only a small group of people are predestined to be saved. The rest, the vast majority, cannot be saved. They are predestined for damnation.

Most people would say, "That doesn't seem fair!" based upon the fact that God was holding them responsible without giving them the ability to choose.

I think God says that here, in our chapter. He is fair, and it's clear that personal responsibility and free will are two important compatible truths.

Just some food for thought.

