

Ezekiel 18: 1-4, 19-23, 29-32

SOUR GRAPES, not as in Aesop's fables where the fox who cannot reach the grapes above him says they must be sour anyway but "*like father like son*" a proverb apparently in use in Judah before the fall of Jerusalem "*The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth have been set on edge. Everyone who eats sour grapes his teeth shall be set on edge*" Jeremiah 31 too- which God in this passage declares is no longer to be used, because the soul who sins shall die, not children for their ancestors sin. This could be taken the message of 1+2 Kings and 1-2 Chronicles where sin is seen as both a communal and an individual responsibility including sin by omission.

Good news; not to be judged for our parents' sins or our children's sins -there are enough of our own to face.

Ezekiel and Jeremiah spoke God's word to His people in a time of suffering loss, isolation terrible change, separation and exile from loved ones, the land and it appeared from God Himself. Was He silent, absent, inactive, powerless? Did He care? Has He forsaken them? Was it something they did or didn't do? Are they the victims of the sins of their kings and ancestors?

In our society which focuses on the individual her/his rights and expectations and at the same time seems to believe that our lives are governed by nurture, experience at the hands of parents and society or by nature an inexorable predetermination by our ancestors and the highest status to which the internet communicator can aspire to be a victim

Or so my 2nd son told me yesterday .

New enquiries laws to hold (OTHER) people responsible for actions years, decades, centuries ago for actions affecting people today sometimes with a view to compensation or revenge .

New law to cope with the effects of sin rather than grace.

Ezekiel chapter 18 after, speaks most of the people of Judah -Jews were taken into captivity/exile after the capture of Jerusalem under king Jehoiakim's rebellion leading to the enslavement of most of the people including Ezekiel and before the reinstated king Zedekiah rebelled and the sack of Jerusalem and burning of the temple captivity/exile of almost all who were left by Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon in chapter 33 (about 586 b c) a fugitive arrives from Jerusalem to confirm the news 586 BCish Ezekiel has been prophesying would happen from chapter 2 - about 11 years.

So had Jeremiah. They have just been shown to have given the true word of God about that so the people in exile should pay attention to the rest of their messages from God. So should we.

Do some around us, even among us feel a bit cut off away from the experience of the life of faith aware of something missing in life, things not going according to plan? Ezekiel reminds us that God is just. He has a purpose to rescue and restore those who

trust Him and bring them to a closer relationship with Himself not just for themselves but for His glory and the benefit of the people around them. Likewise with us.

In 1+2 Kings 1+2 Chronicles the fall of Jerusalem and exile from the land is seen as the culmination of the sin of the kings and people collective and individual accumulated over generations resulting in the exiles in accordance with God's covenant with the people (which was renewed as explained by God through Moses in Deut 28 to 30 in terms later fulfilled by these events) as they entered the land, which also includes the promise IF the people repent Deut 30 v 6

"The Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul that you may live" God will change and set apart our innermost being to love Him. Familiar? Ezek 36 and Jeremiah 31 explained in Deut 30 as part of God's slowly revealed plan?

Different God in the Old Testament my foot!

Where did the sour grapes proverb come from? Perhaps Exodus 20 + Deut 5 the 2nd commandment which forbids making or worshipping images in place of God (the sin of Jeroboam followed by most other kings of Israel and Judah) and says that God will visit that sin on descendants to the 3rd and 4th generation of those who hate Him (oddly enough about the period of that exile as announced by Jeremiah in his letter to the exiles Jer 29) but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love Him and keep His commandments. Part of His covenant promise.

So it is good news that fathers will not be put to death because of their children or children because of their father's sin. Each one shall be put to judgment (put to death)- for his own sin Deut 24: 16 and here Jeremiah 31. Better news is that God has arranged through Jesus Christ and explains through His Holy Spirit that believers need not be put to death for their own sin because His purpose has always been that the judgment should fall on Him as Peter explains *"Christ suffered for sin once for all, the just for the unjust, in order to bring us to God"* 1 Pet 3: 18

When He experienced among other matters the very judgments of the fall of Jerusalem exile, separation from God – forsaken, enslaved among enemies, Ezekiel's prophecies came to survivors of suffering enslaved in exile more comfortably than Ezekiel whose reliability as a speaker of God's word is so soon chapter 33 to be established. Did they pay attention to his words in chapter 36 so soon after that news it could have been a great encouragement. And to their descendants. Perhaps also to enslaved black people in the USA in the spiritual from chapter 37 - dry bones.

It was not a change of God's mind but a stage in the gradual revelation and understanding of God's purposes set from before the foundation of the earth- before Eden. Too much to take in in one go e.g. Luke 24 Jesus explanation of the things concerning Himself in all the scriptures walking to Emmaus. Requiring a change in man's practice. The proverb sour grapes is not to be used in Israel v2

V 21 a wicked man turns to God and does what is right he will liveIf we repent of our own sin and seek forgiveness in faith trusting God that our own sin is atoned for and the guilt of it removed, in Christ we are new creatures .more fully revealed since Ezekiel's time

24 a righteous man turns away, previous good works will not excuse him.
All the examples listed are called abominations not just the ones other people do.

3 case studies from 3 generations of a family

A V5

If a man is righteous towards God and man he shall live... despite his ancestors' sin

Men and women are not controlled or held responsible for their ancestors' sin.

Thank God

The effects of it may make life much more difficult but not inescapable and they/ we are not held responsible for it by God. Yet many appear today to want to hold us to blame now for our predecessors sins whether in slavery persecution genocide imperial exploitation which we may deplore or regret even though the effects of them may affect us or by domestic violence, bad parenting, exploitation of children or the decisions of Edward I, James I, Oliver Cromwell and William III.

Yet God does seem willing to bring His rescue through people they would expect to be victims of the sin of others and despite their own imperfections too (except in Jesus's case) Take Jephtha in Judges 11/12 the illegitimate son of a prostitute living in Gilead .. father described as Gilead i.e. mum had so many clients, the father could have been any one of the men of Gilead, a large area east of the Jordan allocated to 2 1/2 tribes of Israel by Moses and Joshua - not a good father role model. Driven out (exiled) by his half brothers, homeless with no support. Yet the tribes Reuben Gad 1/2 Manasseh choose Jephtha to lead their resistance to the invasion of Gilead by Ammonites and to re-establish faith and justice and God fills him (?) with the Holy Spirit for the task of deliverance as judge/rescuer not victim.

In Judges 6 likewise Gideon's father in other 1/2 of Manasseh had an Ashera shrine and an altar to Baal. 2 foreign gods, one of the abominations listed in Ezekiel 18 but Gideon still called to be rescuer not victim of his father's behaviour. We are not bound inexorably -unable to resist repeating the sins of ancestors or predecessors - by act or omission, habitual or genetic. How can experience get into DNA anyway?

It follows that we cannot blame our sin on the actions of others either -whether by nature or by nurture.

We can't say properly I can't help it or it's not my fault because of something done by somebody else however horrific which does not inexorably make us helpless victims. With God's help we could resist these temptations. We will not be tempted beyond what we are able to bear and God will, with the temptation, provide a way of escape that we may be able to bear it 1 Corinthians 10: 13. But of course we all fail.

B v 10

If the son of a righteous man is unrighteous -sinful toward God and man, he will be held responsible, not his father. I think it means when he is old enough to understand not a young child because of the nature and actions in the examples given. Samuel's sons were corrupt they were rejected as judges. Samuel was not rejected or held to have been unrighteous 1 Sam 12.

This is tough for believing parents. We keep praying and trusting for v 21

C v 14

If the son of a wicked man didn't follow fathers example he shall not die for his father's iniquity. Nor should he be excluded or blamed for it yet people do want us to apologise by which I suppose they mean accept responsibility for the sins of other people ...only Christ could do that because He had none of His own

2 objections from men/women which God anticipates and covers in the prophet's explanation of His word

A v19

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 he shall live. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father nor the father for the iniquity of the son

Why would people want to say that?

A - tradition /self interest. common practice of killing the children eg Nebuchadnezzar killed last king of Judah Zedekiah and his children because Zedekiah had rebelled. 2 kings 25 deterrent prevent revenge by living children later.

Eg 2kings 11 account well known at the time of -queen Attaliah of Judah killing all the royal family including all her grandsons and taking over when her son Ahaziah died except Joash/Jehoash hidden by his aunt with his nanny in the temple for 7 years (victim?) until he became the focus of a coup, killing her and making him king -a king who followed The Lord.

B -revenge- Gibeonites in 2 Sam 21 persuade David to kill 7 descendants of Saul in revenge for Sauls earlier treatment of Gibeonites not Hebrews but having the benefit of a covenant with Joshua for their protection in the land. Revenge is a common enough literary theme eg in Macbeth Macduff feels cheated of full revenge for the loss of his son Fleance because Macbeth has no children on whom Macduff can revenge himself. He wants to return his own terrible loss on his enemy.

This desire for revenge is often dressed differently but comes up in tit for tat violence, feuds, wars, sanctions, prosecutions, Northern Ireland, the Balkans, Middle East, Africa perhaps even 10 Downing Street. In South Africa the peace and reconciliation process was based on repentance and forgiveness instead of revenge.

We are told to leave revenge to God. *Vengeance is mine I will repay says The Lord* Romans 12: 19 summarising several OT texts

B v25

2nd objection yet you say the way of the Lord is not just --do we?

Eg when the wicked person in v 21 turns away from all his sins and keeps God's law is there a hint of the elder brother in the prodigal son in our minds? Or a last minute death bed conversion? Or a recognised very wicked man repenting and getting away with it - like king Manasseh 2 kings 21 the worst of Judah's kings who made Judah sin he and the people both responsible for the Lord bringing the disaster of exile on the people but in 2 Chronicles 33 he repented, prayed in captivity. God was moved and restored his kingdom and delayed the disaster. He turned to do good.

We can think Grace for somebody else is too easy

V 30 the conclusion

I will judge you the remnant of the people of Israel EVERY ONE according to his ways ..repent and turn from all your transgressions I have no pleasure in the death of anyone.

(transgression sin and iniquity in the passage falling short breaking the law rebellion-heart against God and for me a clean sweep)

God clearly states that the people need to repent as well as the leaders ...easy enough to blame them ...and Judah not even a democracy!) Repent AND make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit

But they/we can't do that

But in chapter 36 after the fall of Zedekiah and Jerusalem

More very good news the promise "I will give you and a new heart and a new spirit (as Jeremiah also prophesied a new covenant with law written on their hearts I will be their God and they will be my people in Jer 31 Deut 30) I will put my Spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes, I will cleanse you from all your iniquities restoration to the land (evidence of God's covenant being kept on both sides) and the nations round about you will know that I am the Lord" purpose not just for remnant of Israel/Judah called Jews after the exile but for all the people of God and for the world

The experiences and consequences of covid and the very difficult situations we face in sickness and depression oppression may not be as disastrous as the exile and destruction of the temple and the city- both would happen again- but we can learn about ourselves, others and the Lord in our bad times and from the Old Testament as well as the new. He has a purpose in it. His ways are just even to the extent of causing His judgement on men not to fall not on them but upon Himself in Christ if His people will believe it for the glory of His name and that the nations may know Him

He does not desire the death of a sinner but rather that he would turn from his way and live

Father please help us to show Your forgiveness, your freedom, your love and your purpose in these times

Amen