

“Turn back, and live.”

August 24, 2025

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Ezekiel 18:25–32

25 “Yet you say, ‘The way of the Lord is not just.’ Hear, you Israelites: Is my way unjust? Is it not your ways that are unjust?

26 If a righteous person turns from their righteousness and commits sin, they will die for it; because of the sin they have committed they will die.

27 But if a wicked person turns away from the wickedness they have committed and does what is just and right, they will save their life.

28 Because they consider all the offenses they have committed and turn away from them, that person will surely live; they will not die.

29 Yet the Israelites say, ‘The way of the Lord is not just.’ Are my ways unjust, people of Israel? Is it not your ways that are unjust?

30 “Therefore, you Israelites, I will judge each of you according to your own 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, people of Israel?

32 For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign Lord. Repent and live!

<Introduction>

Through the Word of Ezekiel 18:25–32, I would like for us to think about repentance. Ezekiel was a prophet who ministered during the time of the Babylonian captivity. The trust that the people of Israel had toward God was based upon an official and orthodox faith. They held the pride that God dwelt in the land called Jerusalem, that the covenant between God and Israel was unchanging, and that this covenant was eternal.

However, in the reality where the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, the kingdom of David had perished, and they were torn away from their homeland, they began to harbor many doubts toward God. “Is God not powerless? Has God not abandoned us?” Ezekiel stood face to face with the people of Israel who felt disillusionment, were cynical, held bitter feelings, and were full of anger. Today’s passage speaks of God’s answer to this complaint—**“The way of the Lord is not just”**—and also speaks of God’s invitation to repentance and to new life.

<1. The Proverb>

Let us read verse 25.

25 “Yet you say, ‘The way of the Lord is not just.’ Hear, you Israelites: Is my way unjust? Is it not your ways that are unjust?”

Here, the words “**not just**” point to being self-centered, unpredictable, and without principle. They were throwing this anger at God. Contained in these words is distrust and rebellion against God. And while they accuse God, they seem unable even to feel shame for the deeds they themselves are committing.

This attitude of Israel, beginning with the theme “not just,”—to understand why they are reacting in this way, let us look at verse 2.

18:2 “What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, ‘The fathers eat sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge’?”

Here is presented a proverb often used by Israel in those days. The word “proverb” here does not mean merely a simple saying, but includes also literary metaphors. Simply expressed, it refers to traditional words, concise yet striking at the essence, born from common human experience.

This proverb is expressed in God’s governing “**land of Israel**” as, “**When the fathers eat sour grapes, the children’s teeth are set on edge.**” That is, “When the father commits sin, God causes the guilt of the father to be repaid upon the children.”

This was a proverb used universally in Israel, and it seems to have been their thought system as well. So much so that similar proverbs appear in Jeremiah, Lamentations, and 2 Kings—it can be said to have been a deeply rooted thought in Israel.

However, when we consider the situation in which the Israel of the exile was placed in the book of Ezekiel, it seems that by using this proverb they were expressing, “We ourselves have no sin, we have done nothing wrong. Nevertheless, we are bearing the guilt of our ancestors according to God’s principle.”

Perhaps they might have misunderstood the words of Exodus.

Exodus 34:7 “maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.”

However, these words do not really mean to make the child bear the guilt, but have an educational and warning meaning. That is, since the actions of adults carry an implicit meaning to children, it is a prophetic warning to make adults careful about their actions. Children naturally absorb the words and attitudes of their parents, and it is highly likely that they grow up taking parents as models. Therefore, since the habit of sinning against God is also easily learned and inherited by watching it, I consider that it means, "Pay special attention to your actions."

But, when we look at the way of thinking of Israel, referring to Lamentations:

Lamentations 5:7 "Our ancestors sinned and are no more, and we bear their punishment."

The difficulty we are now facing is not because of us, but because of the sins our ancestors committed. Though the ancestors are no more, we are bearing their guilt. In this way they pushed the responsibility onto the ancestors and were escaping from the responsibility of reality. And this proverb is not only a victim-consciousness of shifting responsibility, but it can also be said to be a misunderstanding of the "theology" they had.

In fact, even we who live in the present age may have a similar way of thinking. Do we not also sometimes mutter, "This happened because of my parents," "It is because of the times"?

Earlier I told you that it was a proverb, but such customs and proverbs may unconsciously exist among us and within our thinking. They are easily accepted, but the proverb itself is very secular, and often asserts something that is apart from the Word of God. We too, if we rely too much on such proverbs or experiences, may become confused when interpreting the Word of God, and may even come to recognize God as "an unjust God."

<2. The Principle of Individual Responsibility>

God does not cause the sins of the fathers to be borne by the descendants. To the people of Israel, Ezekiel explains the principle of individual responsibility.

He gives concrete examples of three generations—grandfather, father, and son. To summarize:

1. Grandfather: walked according to God's statutes, kept His ordinances, and did what is right --> This man is called righteous, and surely he shall live (v.9).
2. Father: did not walk according to God's statutes, but committed abominations --> His bloodguilt shall be upon himself (v.13b).
3. Grandson: saw the evil of his father, but turned away from evil, and kept God's statutes --> It is said that he did what is just and right, and he shall live (v.19b).

By giving these examples, Ezekiel makes clear that God never causes the sins of the fathers to be borne by the descendants. Therefore, the situation that Israel now faces—being taken into captivity—is not because God has lost His “justice,” but because they themselves sinned and fell into such a condition. It is because of the sins that they themselves committed that they are now in this situation.

And today’s main passage, verses 26–28, also summarizes that fact and emphasizes it once again.

26 If a righteous person turns from their righteousness and commits sin, they will die for it; because of the sin they have committed they will die.

27 But if a wicked person turns away from the wickedness they have committed and does what is just and right, they will save their life.

28 Because they consider all the offenses they have committed and turn away from them, that person will surely live; they will not die.

It says so, doesn’t it? This passage, to Israel who were in despair, shifting responsibility, and misunderstanding theology, not only points out their wrong way, but actually teaches them the way of hope. They were not fallen into an inevitable, fatalistic reality without escape, but before them there was a chance to choose “injustice” or “righteousness.”

For God says, if they now choose and walk in the right way, **all the transgressions which he had committed before will not be remembered (v.21).**

In fact, the same can be said of us. Even if we may receive bad influence from parents or from society, what path we choose to walk and live is our own choice and responsibility.

All of us who have gathered here, I believe, desire and wish to walk in the right way before God. Then, now that we know that God does not charge us with the sins of our ancestors, how should we live? Then the question arises: What is the right way? What is the standard of it? If we find that we have strayed from that way, we can return. That is to say, we can repent.

But here there is something we need to know.

The sense of “righteousness” in fallen human beings is distorted. Therefore, even those things which from human experience we think, “This is right,” “This is what we should do,” may in fact be deviated from God’s standard. In other words, even if it seems like a convincing thought, in reality it is very often separated from the Word of God.

Thus, from the basis of our human experience or morality, it is difficult to define completely “righteousness” or “the right way before God.”

<3. God's Unchanging Standard and Dull Humanity>

Then, what is the "right way" that God requires?

Ezekiel, when explaining whether the grandfather, father, or son was "righteous or not," shows an unchanging standard. That is, across three generations, God's standard does not change, and God judges their deeds with the same measure.

Looking at the examples of the righteous person which Ezekiel sets forth (vv.5–9, vv.15–17):

1. Not practicing idolatry, and not doing the abominations that the law has defined.

2. In relation with others in the community, especially concerning the socially weak:

Not exploiting, returning what was given as pledge, not robbing, actively supporting the life of the unfortunate, dealing properly with matters of property or legal disputes with those who are economically disadvantaged. (Because the characteristic of wanting to become "god" lies in the unconscious level of human beings, when one gains power, not wielding it oppressively over one's neighbor seems to be the main point here.)

Ezekiel raises concrete and practical matters.

This is the same as the core of the commandments spoken by Jesus:

To love God, and to love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:37–39).

God's standard does not change, transcending both time and nations.

Therefore, the "turn back," "turn away from transgressions" that expresses the meaning of "repentance" in today's passage means to return from one's deviated path back to this unchanging commandment. Repentance begins with recognizing that, from the one and only standard of God, we are deviated, we are mistaken.

But here is one thing we should think about.

Ezekiel depicts the people of Israel as a people with a "heart of stone." That much, they were dull toward their own sin, and dull to the fact that they had strayed from God's way. To make them realize, God drove them into the difficult situation of captivity. And yet, still they did not realize, could not realize, could not notice, and insisted, "We are not mistaken."

But this does not apply only to Israel. The Bible says that all fallen human beings are dull toward sin. Therefore, being dull already means that in one's own sense, to feel "Ah, now I have strayed from God's way" is in principle, and objectively, a difficult state.

Even Christians who have received the Holy Spirit may not realize, from God's perspective, that their own walk has strayed from God's way. Boldly they shift it onto their ancestors, their

environment, or others. “I tried to live rightly,” “The fault is with my parents, that environment, that person.” Even if not spoken aloud, boldly we think so in our hearts. Of course, this includes me who now stand here, and all people.

Therefore, rather than relying on our own senses, we need to measure ourselves against God's unchanging commandments. In this present age, because we are saved by believing in Jesus, there is a tendency to discard the law. It is true that by believing in Jesus our sins are forgiven. But fallen human beings unconsciously have the habit of continuing to walk by their fallen senses. This is a walk that grieves the heart of God.

The apostle Paul also says in the letter to the Romans, **“If it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin.”** When he measured himself against God's commandments, then at last he could recognize “the sin that the Bible speaks of.” Sins which human senses cannot notice, the Word of God points out.

For fallen human beings to be able to correctly recognize the concept of “sin from God's perspective,” it is necessary, as we walk as Christians, to keep confirming our walk by measuring it against God's standard.

<4. God Who Desires Life>

31–32

31 Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, people of Israel?

32 For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign Lord. Repent and live!

God's commandments are what teach us where to return to. And the reason God gives these commandments is not to judge us and cause us to die, but to make us live.

“Cast away from you all your transgressions!” “For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone”—God calls out strongly and repeatedly to the people.

The Lord's proposal “Live!” is filled with love. And it is based upon God's commandments, and requires the human side to “cast away transgressions” and to “turn back.” In the place of repentance there is grace, and one can receive abundant life.

Now, did the people of Israel repent? Sadly, to their ears Ezekiel's words were merely a "parable." In the end they were destroyed, and only a very few remained and were gathered, and then at last it is recorded, "they shall know that I am the Lord."

God's call "Turn back, and live" to Israel is also a call to us. Do we have a dull heart of stone like Israel? Or do we have a heart of flesh that can sensitively respond to God's commandments? We can choose. To choose the way of righteousness and live, or to perish like Israel. Looking at the walk of our ancestors, Israel, let us take it as a teaching material by negative example, turn back, and walk the way of God's righteousness. And not only in heart, but after turning back also with action, there awaits the abundant spring of God's life.

<Conclusion>

Each of us is pressed with choices in our daily walk. God does not make us bear the sins of our ancestors. The Bible says we are not ruled by fatalism or such things.

Therefore, now, depending on how we choose, the way to new life is opened.

Let us be renewed in spirit and in heart, and put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness (Ephesians 4:23). Knowing God's commandments, and turning back from all unrighteousness that has strayed from them, let us respond to His voice calling, "Turn back, and live," and today take a new step forward.

Let us pray.