

The word of the LORD came to me: ²“What do you mean by using this proverb concerning the land of Israel:

“The fathers eat sour grapes,
and the children’s teeth are set on edge?”

³As I live”—this is the declaration of the Lord GOD—“you will no longer use this proverb in Israel. ⁴Look, every life belongs to me. The life of the father is like the life of the son—both belong to me. The person who sins is the one who will die.

²⁵“But you say, ‘The Lord’s way isn’t fair.’ Now listen, house of Israel: Is it my way that is unfair? Instead, isn’t it your ways that are unfair? ²⁶When a righteous person turns from his righteousness and acts unjustly, he will die for this. He will die because of the injustice he has committed. ²⁷But if a wicked person turns from the wickedness he has committed and does what is just and right, he will preserve his life. ²⁸He will certainly live because he thought it over and turned from all the transgressions he had committed; he will not die. ²⁹But the house of Israel says, ‘The Lord’s way isn’t fair.’ Is it my ways that are unfair, house of Israel? Instead, isn’t it your ways that are unfair?

³⁰“Therefore, house of Israel, I will judge each one of you according to his ways.” This is the declaration of the Lord GOD. “Repent and turn from all your rebellious acts, so they will not become a sinful stumbling block to you. ³¹Throw off all the transgressions you have committed, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit. Why should you die, house of Israel? ³²For I take no pleasure in anyone’s death.” This is the declaration of the Lord GOD. “So repent and live!

God is Predictable

We’ll it’s been a fun year hasn’t it? We’re $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way through it. I can hardly recall what happened at the beginning of the year but we all know what happened since. It’s been unpredictable. At first masks were said, “They don’t work.” Now they’re mandated because they work... but not for smoke. Our politicians have been equally unpredictable saying, “Come on down to China town” but now we can’t go anywhere. Everything was shut down and of all things there was a shortage of toilet paper. Many people have wondered, “Why is God allowing this to happen?” Still more might even asked, “What have we done to deserve this?” Now each and every political party has assured us we know who to blame, “It’s not us.”

We might accuse God of being unfair. We didn’t do anything to deserve this. But then we might start to sound like Israel at Ezekiel’s time. Ezekiel’s message to Israel’s complaint, “We didn’t do anything! It’s not fair” is “You haven’t seen anything yet.” Their excuses are systematically torn apart and God reveals their inconsistency.

God is predictable: In his judgment and in his love.

Ezekiel isn’t predictable. He’s that prophet who laid down on his right side for 390 days. He isn’t like any of the other Old Testament prophets. He is not serving in the Old Kingdom under the rule or reign of David. The kingdom has split. North and South. The Northern 10 tribes have disappeared, gone forever. The glory days are over and God has plucked Judah and placed her in a pagan land far from home. Babylon. They are subjected, scattered, defeated and Ezekiel is right there with them. Times were tough and they voice their complaint with a proverb.

“Our Fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.” Sour grapes don’t sound like fun. They sound like vinegar. How would you like to bathe your teeth on a regular basis in vinegar?

Doing so would stripe off all your enamel and leave you with dull teeth. God's people are complaining that their parents ate sour grapes (sinned) and the children (those in exile) are suffering for it (teeth set on edge/dull). This proverb implies that they are suffering for the sins of their parents.

And that's technically true. Exodus 20:5 states, *"I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sins of their fathers to the third and fourth generation..."* Their parents really did mess up the Promised Land. They bowed down to false gods. Ezekiel lists the abominations of Israel in the preceding chapters. They followed King Manasseh who rebuilt the high places, established altars to Baal, bowed in worship to the starry host. He built altars in the LORD's temple and sacrificed his son in the fire (2 Kings 21). They abandoned the LORD their God for false Gods.

Not only is that true biblically but it's also true in society. Parent's sins become their children's. If you are a drunkard, your children will likely turn towards drinking. If you divorce your children are likely to turn towards divorce. If you were abused, it's likely your children will turn towards abuse. We might give up, become fatalistic with our thinking, and say, "Well there is no use in trying! Since there isn't anything I can do about it. It's someone else's fault. I was born this way." *"Our fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge."* I'm a victim.

This complaint also implies there is an excuse. Excuses are like a game of hot potato and someone else always ends up holding it. It's the oldest game on record, Adam fell in to sin he passed that potato to Eve. Eve handed it to the serpent but in reality they both threw the potato at God. This is your fault. The woman you put here with me... Like an episode of Jerry Springer, "It's not fair. I didn't do anything. It's not my fault." We have our own excuses. And excuses are not repentance. How would you feel if, "I'm sorry" is followed by a 20 minutes explanation as to why it really isn't my fault? You might question whether or not one was sorry.

Is it really your teachers fault when you fail a class? Is it really the police's fault that they enforce poorly written laws? Are we just innocent victims of credit card companies? It may be that we suffer for the sins of our fathers but to be honest we suffer for our own sins. We'll excuse our sin, thinking it really wasn't that bad. We're enlightened people and God didn't really mean that. Yet every time we excuse sin we question the authority and wisdom of the Almighty God. We aren't just blaming others for our sin, we blame God. And God is sick of our sour grapes.

Under solemn oath he swears, *"you will no longer use this proverb in Israel. Look, every life belongs to me. The life of the father is like the life of the son – both belong to me. The person who sins is the one who will die."* Israel understood corporate judgment, in other words if one part suffers, the whole community suffers or when one rejoices they all rejoice. They understood and operated as a community. Americans are much more individualistic. Here Ezekiel says something that would surprise the Hebrew. He emphasizes the individual saying that the son does not suffer for the sins of the father. They were personally responsible for their own sin. It's not a matter of being born one way or another. God will judge everyone justly, *"The one who sins is the one who will die."* The son won't be condemned for the unbelief of his father. Nor will the son be saved because of the belief of his father.

God gets rid of the grapes and begins unpacking his case against Israel. Like a good prosecuting attorney stacking evidence before the court (verses 5-24) God gives specific examples of judging sinners for their individual sins alone. They weren't as innocent as they suppose and neither are we. But Israel continues to complain. They complain the punishment doesn't fit the crime. So the LORD responds, *"Now listen, house of Israel: Is it my way that is unfair? Instead, isn't it your ways that are unfair? When a righteous person turns from his righteousness and acts unjustly, he will die for this. He will die because of the injustice he has committed. But if a wicked person turns from the wickedness he has committed and does what is just and right, he will preserve his life."*

God's ways are consistent with his character. He is predictable. God is consistent. Israel isn't. Israel isn't any more predictable than they are righteous. God is predictable and this is what he will do. If you sin, even if you were righteous you will die. However if you are wicked and you turn from evil, do what I right, you will live. Israel on the other hand wants to live and continue in evil. They aren't being fair but God is.

While he had every right to remove them from the Promised Land and put them to death outside of his grace he doesn't want the death of anyone. *"I don't take pleasure in the death of the wicked but that they would turn from their ways and live."*

God wasn't done with his people in exile. Even though 587 was just around the corner and Jerusalem would be taken, the temple destroyed. The place where God revealed his name to the nations would become a pile of rubble. God is predictable and he offers a promise, "Turn and live." *"Repent and turn from all your rebellious acts, so they will not become a sinful stumbling block to you. ³¹ Throw off all the transgressions you have committed, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit. Why should you die, house of Israel?"*

God wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. God's takes pleasure in saving. The problem is not with God. The problem is with our heart and spirit. That's why we sing Psalm 51 – *"Create in me a new heart oh God, and take not your Holy Spirit from me."* after the sermon. We are asking that God's Word do what he has promised. We can't obtain a new heart on our own. God must give it to us.

And that he has. God would preserve this nation for the sake of his promise. He would bring them back long enough to send the Christ, his son, into the world to suffer and die for those who don't deserve it. Earlier in Ezekiel the LORD called Israel, *"A rebellious pagans... and obstinate^[b] and hardhearted."* (2:3,4). Ezekiel gives us graphic descriptions of their sin and images of coming judgment but even in the darkest moments God's love shines through. Turn and live.

God doesn't ask we feel worse than we already do instead he motivates us and gives us the desire to love and do his will. Later in Ezekiel 36 we'll see that new heart and new spirit that God provides for us. He removes our heart of stone and gives us the heart of Christ.

God takes no pleasure in the death of anyone. God is eager to forgive and give life. His delight is to declare to you, "Forgiven." It is by his authority, because he wants me to remind you of this on a

regular basis, “You are forgiven in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It’s the father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. His response is always the same even before we repent he is already waiting ready to forgive.

So no matter what happens in this world we have one who is predictable, consistent, unchanging, though we are inconsistent, fall into sin, and blame others. We will suffer because we live in a broken and sinful world. We will suffer as a consequence to our actions. We may even suffer for the sins of our fathers but Exodus 20:5 continues, *“I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sins of their fathers to the third and fourth generation but showing faithful love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commands.”*

He reassures us of that promise daily as we remember our baptism and even more so as he gives us his body for the forgiveness of our sins. He reassures throughout his Word and here in his command we hear his promise. *so turn and live” (31,32)*. The resurrected Jesus has given this good news to everyone. We know what pleases God. We know what is his good and gracious will, “Save sinners.” Hear these words, repent, and believe this news. Cling to the promise of his Word and then make these words your confession so that others too may know the LORD, our predictable God. Who does not change from year to year.

2020 has been unpredictable. We don’t know what more will happen. We do know that God is consistent in his love. Amen.