

A MEDITATION ON EZEKIEL 18:2

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In the Old Testament lesson for today from the prophet Ezekiel, there is one line that has stuck with me the last week or so. In Ezekiel 18:1-2 it is written: "The word of the Lord came to me: What do you people mean by quoting this proverb about the land of Israel: 'The parents eat sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge?' You will no longer quote this in Israel."

The parents eat sour grapes, and the kid's teeth are set on edge. An old saying—that we are no longer to tell each other or live by.

Well, Ezekiel lived about 600 years before Jesus came on the scene when he made this proclamation. What is this all about and is this 2,600 year old quote worth paying any attention to today, or is it just the odd ramblings of an old prophet?

The parents eat sour grapes, and the kids get bad teeth. But stop listening to this, he says.

Well, sometimes these old prophets have a lot to say about our modern life.

We all carry what some people call "baggage" in our life. Yes, baggage—all the stuff, and often negative, we carry around with us—either from our ancestors (parents, grandparents, and further back) or that we have picked up along the way in life. Some of our "baggage" is part of our DNA and we can't do much about. The size of your ears, your hair color. Some of it is a list of family traits that we learned along the way. Some of it we have brought on ourselves. Some of it is family sin, or lingering guilt that passes on from one generation to the other.

Some of you have a few suitcases full and some of you have small backpacks. One of things I hear from people who are dating or meeting people on-line for companionship is the question of how much "baggage" this person is bringing into the relationship. You know what I mean. Baggage means "issues."

What Ezekiel was dealing with was a belief, from the early books of the Old Testament (specifically Exodus 20:5, Numbers 14:18) that the sins of one generation will be inherited on, from generation to generation and that God will hold these old sins against all the relatives to come. Maybe you have heard it in this way, "The sins of the father are visited upon generation after generation. This was a religious belief some call "collective group responsibility." Ezekiel, as well as another prophet of his time, Jeremiah, both claimed that God had set up a New Covenant—in which the law of God was to be found in our hearts, not on a tablet and that sin was no longer a "collective responsibility" but an individual's responsibility. We are to be judged by God for our own behavior, not on our father's or mother's or grandparents'.

How does fall into your life today? Is there any residual family guilt lurking in your life and showing up as you lay in bed at 3 in the morning, thinking about things? Maybe stuff you do not

talk to others about. I was thinking about this and I do know that the effects of our relatives' sins can be seen in our life. For example, abuse, or dishonest living, or substance abuse, or suicidal behaviors do affect us as we grow up. But, we are not totally destined to repeat any of this or be punished by God for this. We are accountable only for our own decisions. For Ezekiel's audience, this was a new thing-a new taste of grace from our Heavenly Father. But with that grace comes individual responsibility to seek private forgiveness.

You might say -so what? Makes sense to me. But sometimes these family sins hang on to us like a little burr that sticks to the edge of your socks after you have been out walking in a field. It quietly lives next to your skin and occasionally pokes a bit. And for some of you it is perhaps larger than a small burr. It is there, whether you see it right now, or not. It is that 3 a.m. in the morning stuff.

Let me give you an example. This scripture reminded me of a friend I had a friend in high school named Steve. I remember going over to his house and his mother told him, in front of me, that the family had a bunch of problems in their history and that Steve was born "under a black star." That were her words. "Under a black star." Now Steve would tell me this himself whenever things did not go his way. "It is because I was born under a black star," he would tell me.

I watched him do dangerous things. Like when he was around 19 he bought a Chevrolet Corvette and drove it way too fast. One night he flipped that car out in a cornfield on Rt. 76 outside of Belvidere, IL and almost died. I guess that black star was active that night, or his belief that his life was not worth much. At another time he suggested we all crowd into a car, close the windows and smoke cigarettes. First one out, choking to death, is the loser. I told him that didn't sound like the healthiest activity, but he said he was born under that black star, so what the heck. I lost touch with Steve over the years. I then learned a few years ago that he was killed in an auto accident.

Yes, family history can turn into a burden, or often a dilemma. I recently read in the NY Times an essay by a person who learned that his great-grandfather was a very active member of the Ku Klux Klan. Also, I have a friend named Howard who started doing genealogy research and found a newspaper article from the early 1900s about a grandparent who shot a person to death in a bar. Both of these people were perplexed. They wondered: What does this say about me? Do I have a responsibility to make amends? Neither had an easy answer.

Now I cannot reach into another's heart, but I believe that my friend Steve lived a life where he believed that the sins of the family were transferred to him and punishment was always waiting. If only he could have stumbled across old Ezekiel and listened-Your parents may have eaten sour grapes, but your teeth are your own and do not have to be on edge. I really think people can, if they honestly confront their family history. What is "sin" and what are typical conflicts, and what are inherited tendencies sometimes is all mixed up. But the real issue is to

stop cycles of blame and courageously take charge of their own lives. If you “sin,” then take responsibility and repent and move on in freedom.

I do not want to say I am healthier than anyone else, but in my life I have had to deal with this. In short, my father was an alcoholic, as was his father. And in his early life he was a peripheral person that resulted in the death of someone. And my mother was a total conflict-avoider and what they call a Pollyanna-seeing only good in everything. This is basically a life of denial. A typical scene: One evening I remember my father coming into the kitchen with a pistol in his hand. My mother was cooking and I was sitting at the table. My father said, gun in hand, “I am depressed and think I will commit suicide.” My mother says, “Oh, no you don’t. The hamburgers are almost ready. Let’s eat.”

I asked myself at the time, and over years, “Is this me?” “Am I stuck with this?” In other words, - my relatives are eating sour grapes, and I wonder if my teeth will rot out as part of God’s punishment for this kind of stuff. Am I caught up in this?

By the grace of God, and loving people in my life I eventually looked at this whole thing honestly-and I must say with the Holy Spirit and Jesus beside me, and said “no.” I accept the influence and consequences of family sin on my life but do not accept the responsibility for it. Now I deal with my personal sin and that is it. The repentance I seek it for me. The rest is on them. I refuse to live with the burdens my friend Steve carried.

Now, as some of you know, I am part of a healing prayer ministry here at St. Luke’s called OSL-The Order of St. Luke. We pray with people for healing. One of the prayer techniques we use is to have people identify a period in their life where there was trauma. We then re-visit that episode but also have the person call in Jesus to be there with them-and replay it all with Jesus intervening in whatever way the Spirit decides. This is a way to free a person from the sins of the past. Then we have the person put their hands in the air and shake, shake, shake -cast away, all that bad stuff away.

Many of you have dogs. You know how, if they are out in the rain and then come inside, they shake, shake, shake. The water flies -and they are comfortable and dry again. That is what the release of family sin is like for us as individuals. Shake, shake, shake.

Regarding this “shaking off sin,” it is interesting that in verse 31, , Ezekiel says this: “Cast off all the sins you have committed against me and make yourself a new heart and a new spirit.”

I pray that if you are one of those people who are perhaps in bondage to the past, that you can listen to old Ezekiel and with the help of prayer and the Holy Spirit, and Jesus, free yourself from these powers, -in a sense shake yourself free of these things-no matter what shape they take for you in your life.

And listen again, as Ezekiel says, -no longer believe the proverb: the parents eat sour grapes and the children’s teeth are on edge. This is a Gospel lesson buried in the Old Testament. It is a buried message of how the grace and mercy of God can free us from the past. Amen.