

# Ezekiel: Street Preacher to the Exiles

Bible Background • Ezekiel 18

Printed Text • Ezekiel 18:1-9, 30-32 | Devotional Reading • Psalm 147

## Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will EXAMINE behavior in which we blame others as the cause, COMMIT to be responsible for our own behavior, and ENGAGE in responsible behavior that finds favor with God.

## In Focus

Alex and Andrew grew up watching their father, Mason, come home drunk. Sometimes Mason would scream at their mom or them or sometimes just go to bed to sleep it off. They saw him miss work because of hangovers and then have nothing to do in the evening but drink some more.

When Andrew moved out of the house, he prided himself on how he could drink responsibly. He would go out for drinks with the guys after work and enjoy himself at a weekend party. It was hard living on his own, though, and soon his treat of a nightcap turned to more and more drinking. Andrew was worried about what he saw his own life becoming, but what could he do? He had never had a positive role model to show him how to deal with life's hardships. His dad had been an alcoholic and now he was borderline too. What had anyone really expected to happen?

Alex watched as his brother descended into the same path their father did. Even though Alex was the spitting image of his dad, they were very different in temperament. Knowing that he would likely have a problem with alcohol if he tried it, he decided to completely abstain. There were plenty of fun things to do with his friends that didn't involve drinks.

*How have you followed in your parents' footsteps? When have you decided specifically to not follow their example?*

## Keep in Mind

“For all people are mine to judge—both parents and children alike. And this is my rule: The person who sins is the one who will die” (Ezekiel 18:4, NLT)

## Words You Should Know

**A. Soul (Ezekiel 18:4)** nephesh (Heb.) — Meaning, life, person's desire, emotion; the inner being of a person

**B. Repent (v. 30)** shub (Heb.) — To feel sorry for having done wrong, change of mind; to turn back or to weep in grief over an act

## Say It Correctly

**Jehoiachin.** jeh-HOY-ah-kin

**Buzi.** BOO-zee

## KJV

**Ezekiel 18:1** The word of the LORD came unto me again, saying,  
2 What mean ye, that ye use this proverb concerning the land of Israel, saying, The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge?  
3 As I live, saith the Lord GOD, ye shall not have occasion any more to use this proverb in Israel.  
4 Behold, all souls are mine; as the soul of the father, so also the soul of the son is mine: the soul that sinneth, it shall die.  
5 But if a man be just, and do that which is lawful and right,  
6 And hath not eaten upon the mountains, neither hath lifted up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, neither hath defiled his neighbour's wife, neither hath come near to a menstruous woman,  
7 And hath not oppressed any, but hath restored to the debtor his pledge, hath spoiled none by violence, hath given his bread to the hungry, and hath covered the naked with a garment;  
8 He that hath not given forth upon usury, neither hath taken any increase, that hath withdrawn his hand from iniquity, hath executed true judgment between man and man,  
9 Hath walked in my statutes, and hath kept my judgments, to deal truly; he is just, he shall surely live, saith the Lord GOD.  
30 Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways, saith the Lord GOD. Repent, and turn yourselves from all your transgressions; so iniquity shall not be your ruin.  
31 Cast away from you all your transgressions, whereby ye have transgressed; and make you a new heart and a new spirit: for why will ye die, O house of Israel?  
32 For I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth, saith the Lord GOD: wherefore turn yourselves, and live ye.

## NLT

**Ezekiel 18:1** Then another message came to me from the LORD:  
2 "Why do you quote this proverb concerning the land of Israel: 'The parents have eaten sour grapes, but their children's mouths pucker at the taste'?"  
3 As surely as I live, says the Sovereign LORD, you will not quote this proverb anymore in Israel.  
4 For all people are mine to judge—both parents and children alike. And this is my rule: The person who sins is the one who will die.  
5 Suppose a certain man is righteous and does what is just and right.  
6 He does not feast in the mountains before Israel's idols or worship them. He does not commit adultery or have intercourse with a woman during her menstrual period.  
7 He is a merciful creditor, not keeping the items given as security by poor debtors. He does not rob the poor but instead gives food to the hungry and provides clothes for the needy.  
8 He grants loans without interest, stays away from injustice, is honest and fair when judging others,  
9 and faithfully obeys my decrees and regulations. Anyone who does these things is just and will surely live, says the Sovereign LORD.  
30 Therefore, I will judge each of you, O people of Israel, according to your actions, says the Sovereign LORD. Repent, and turn from your sins. Don't let them destroy you!  
31 Put all your rebellion behind you, and find yourselves a new heart and a new spirit. For why should you die, O people of Israel?  
32 I don't want you to die, says the Sovereign LORD. Turn back and live!"

## The People, Places, and Times

**House of Israel.** This is a phrase used to address the Israelites. It is used throughout the Bible, primarily by the prophets such as Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Amos. The phrase is often referred to when the Lord through the prophets, begins to speak to Israel. The phrase is normally used as a way of gathering the Israelites' attention

before speaking to them. Many examples in the Bible support this theory (Jeremiah 3:20; Ezekiel 33:11; Amos 5:25).

**Proverb.** A proverb is a short, wise saying used for a long time by many people. The proverbs and the lessons they taught were passed down from generation to generation. It was a condensed parable or fable that was sometimes presented to clearly teach a lesson. The proverbs of the Israelites and other people of the east were primarily “similitudes,” which present their wisdom as a pair of truisms that are similar to each other (e.g. Proverbs 26:11). Many proverbs are generally true, as opposed to absolutely consequential. Most are in this category of true (Proverbs 17:22), while others were false (Ezekiel 18:2). The main purpose of a proverb was to help families instruct to their young. Many proverbs can be found throughout the Bible. The Book of Proverbs lists many wise saying of kings and powerful leaders. Most of these are short, compact statements that express truths about human behavior.

*When have you seen a proverb play out in your life?*

## Background

The Prophet Ezekiel lived during the Babylonian exile and was active as a prophet for approximately 20 years from 593 BC to at least 573 BC. Ezekiel lived as an exile according to the title of the book that bares his name (Ezekiel 1:1-2), he was carried away as a captive with Jehoiachin (1:2; 2 Kings 24:14–16) in about 597 BC. His prophetic call came to him in the fifth year of Jehoiachin’s captivity (593 BC). Ezekiel held a prominent place among the exiles, and was frequently consulted by the elders (Ezekiel 8:1; 11:25; 14:1; 20:1). In the ninth year of his exile, he lost his wife by some sudden and unforeseen tragedy (8:1; 24:1, 18). According to the information in the book’s opening, he was the son of the priest Buzi (1:3) and his name in Hebrew meant “God strengthens (this child)” or possibly, “May God strengthen (this person).” Because he was of a priestly family, he probably had a good education, especially in the Law, and his father may even have had some influence in Jerusalem. The time and manner of his death are unknown.

### At-A-Glance

1. God Reminds Judah of His Sovereignty (Ezekiel 18:1–4)
2. God Reminds Them What is Righteous (vv. 5–9)
3. God Reminds Them of their Personal Responsibility (vv. 30–32)

## In Depth

**1. God Reminds Judah of His Sovereignty (Ezekiel 18:1–4)** The prophets had warned of God’s judgment for generations. Because of that, the captives blamed their ancestors for their problems. They complained that God was punishing them for something their parents had done, quoting an old Jewish proverb, often used when a person was having trouble and it didn’t seem like he’d done anything to deserve it. They failed to realize they were even worse than their ancestors (Jeremiah 16:12). They remembered only the sins of the past, forgetting their sins of the present. Some White Americans tend to have a similar problem. They readily admit the past sin of slavery but protest that they had nothing to do with it. They complain about the demands of Blacks, forgetting their present injustice. God forbade Judah’s complaining. First He reminded them that He is God. He is in charge, and if the people were living in faith they would recognize His work. Even when people rebel, God is in charge of their souls. Second, He assures them that only those individuals who rebel against God will die. He is not unjust. Out of mercy, God waited for generations, looking for repentance. Finally, He had to send His judgment. Each individual soul is responsible for its own sin and will be judged accordingly.

*Why do we often feel we are being punished for someone else’s missteps?*

**2. God Reminds Them What is Righteous (vv. 5–9)** However, just because a person has a right to stand as an individual in God’s hand doesn’t mean all his problems are over. It means he’s got to watch how he lives. It means he’s got to stick to the standards. It means he’s got to uphold the Law.

If you don’t want to stand there with your knees wobbling, if you don’t want to stand there with fear and trembling, you’re going to have to do your bit to live in God’s way. The greatest of the commandments is to love the Lord your God and to love your neighbor as yourself. The examples of the commandments we should keep (18:6-8), quite naturally, fit both categories: loving God and loving our neighbor. God never intended anything else.

*How do you remind yourself what the right thing to do is?*

**3. God Reminds Them of Their Personal Responsibility (18:30–32)** God does not enjoy punishing the wicked. He sends punishment so the wicked will repent. When they do repent, He gives them life and hope. Repentance works in reverse too. The previously righteous man who turns to a wicked life opens himself to God’s judgment.

God concluded His comments with a promise. If any wicked man would turn from his wicked ways his life would be saved. The choice was theirs. “Why do you want to die?” God cried. “Seek me and live!” (cf, Deuteronomy 30:19; Amos 5:4). Hinting at the coming Gospel of Jesus Christ, God promised a new heart and a new spirit to any who would live in faithful obedience to Him.

Through the power of the Holy Spirit, the Christian has an even better opportunity to live righteously than the people of Judah during the time of Ezekiel. But modern Christians have the same problem that Ezekiel’s hearers had. They have an attitude of self-righteousness, complaining about the sins of others without examining themselves.

*Why do we not do the right thing, even after we are given good advice?*

### **Search the Scriptures**

1. Why did God say the old proverb should not be used? (Ezekiel 18:1-4)
2. What did God say the people of Judah needed? (v. 31)
3. Does God enjoy punishing people? (18:32) Explain.

### **Discuss the Meaning**

1. What does God do when you try to turn from your old ways, but keep slipping back?
2. God had described Himself as “visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children’s children, unto the third and to the fourth generation” (Exodus 34:7). Now He says individuals pay for their sins, specifically saying the parents’ sin does not lie on the child. Scripture tells us that God is unchanging (Hebrews 13:8). Why does God seem to be changing His methods? Was He not satisfied with the previous arrangement? Is He admitting that He had made a mistake? Explain.

### **Liberating Lesson**

Many people are familiar with old superstitious sayings passed down through generations. These may include sayings such as: seven years of bad luck for breaking a mirror; you will go to jail if your foot is swept by a broom; you will have bad luck if a black cat crosses your path, or good luck if you eat blackeyed peas at the start of a new year.

If we live our lives according to these kinds of sayings, we not only keep ourselves in bondage, but we also keep generations of our descendants in bondage too. As children of God, we must realize that no superstition or old saying is more powerful than God. On the contrary, we must depend totally on God, because He holds our complete destiny in His hand.

### Application for Activation

Think of problems in your life that you feel were caused by someone else. To what extent have you contributed to the problems yourself? What attitude should you have toward people who cause problems for you? What can you do to ease these problems?

Look at the problems you have caused yourself. What attitude does God want you to have toward these problems? What can you do to correct them?

### Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

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### Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

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## More Light on the Text

**Ezekiel 18:1–9, 30–32** The eighteenth chapter of Ezekiel contains a full account of the theme of individual responsibility—God deals with people according to their personal acts of sin or righteousness. The prophet Ezekiel debunks the people’s common notion that their suffering or punishment (the Babylonian Exile) is the consequence of their fathers’ sin. By holding that idea, they refuse to take responsibility for their actions. Instead they tend to attribute their present plight to consequences of their fathers’ wrongs, thus shifting the blame.

**1 The word of the LORD came unto me again, saying, 2 What mean ye, that ye use this proverb concerning the land of Israel, saying, The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge?**

The prophet starts this portion of his prophecy with a word from the Lord. The phrase “the word of the LORD came unto me” means that he heard from the Lord or that God prophetically spoke to him. It is a phrase commonly used among the prophets. Here the Lord calls the prophet’s attention to a slogan, which seems to be current among the people during their exile. The Lord, through Ezekiel, questions the people as to what they mean by using the proverb “the fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.”

This proverb turns out to only be as true as the schoolyard retort, “Sticks and stone may break my bones, but words can never hurt me.” The idea of the grapes proverb is that the hardship that the contemporary generation is going through is the fault of the previous generation. It is as if the forefathers ate unripe grapes which taste sour and bitter, but instead of receiving the unpleasant effect, it was transferred to those who never tasted the grapes. This sounds absurd. In Israel’s opinion, they are taking the brunt of their ancestors’ wrongdoing. Although the early laws in the Israel’s covenant relationship with Lord stipulate individual responsibility for wrong behavior (Exodus 20:22–23:33), the people tend to hold only to the part of the Decalogue where the Lord threatens to punish the children for the sins of their fathers to third and fourth generation (Exodus 20:5; Deuteronomy 5:9). The people choose to ignore the fact that living so closely with one’s family and clan as they did in those days, three or even four generations of one family will likely participate or at least be complicit in any sin the family’s patriarch commits.

Rather than accepting their faults and repenting from their sins, with this slogan the people accuse God of partiality or bad judgment, and of punishing them for what their forefathers had done in the past. This enables the people to shift blame and deny their sin. By using this slogan, the people also seem to doubt the truth that God is a just and righteous judge. Therefore, the Lord says that the slogan will no more hold.

**3 As I live, saith the Lord GOD, ye shall not have occasion any more to use this proverb in Israel. 4 Behold, all souls are mine; as the soul of the father, so also the soul of the son is mine: the soul that sinneth, it shall die.**

The Lord continues His instruction to the prophet that the people's notion of transferred guilt will no longer be used as an excuse for evading responsibility. The proverb which they hitherto have been using (cf. Jeremiah 31:29) will no more apply because all people are equal in His sight. He introduces this correction with the phrase "As I live," which gives authority and emphasis to what He is about to say. Also the use of "behold" (Heb. *hen*, HANE), often used as an interjection, gives an emphatic stress to the point He makes: "all souls are mine." The emphasis here is that God as the sovereign Creator and sustainer of all things has the right to deal with us as He wills without question. He has the right to hand one over to death, just as He can call another to life. Equally, the Lord can hold the child accountable for their parent's deed, just as He can decide to call the parent to question regarding the child's misdeeds. Life and death are in His hands, and judgment is His prerogative. No one, not even Israel, has a right to question His judgment, and He is not accountable to anyone. He does what is right in His sight.

He continues, "the soul that sinneth, it shall die." This means the child will no more carry the brunt of the parent's sin; neither will the parent any more take the responsibility for the child's wrong action. Whoever sins will have to live with it. The clause "the soul that sinneth it shall die" is consistent with God's order of things in other passages of the Bible (cf. Genesis 2:17; Romans 1:29–32; 1 Corinthians 6:9–11; Galatians 5:19–21). At this point, it is necessary to understand the meaning of "death" or "die" in this passage. What does the word "death" or "to die" (used in the passage about 13 times) mean in the context of the passage? Does it mean physical death? Although physical death can be attributed to sin after the fall, physical death is not necessarily always the penalty for sin. Death here evidently means spiritual death and separation from God.

**5 But if a man be just, and do that which is lawful and right, 6 And hath not eaten upon the mountains, neither hath lifted up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, neither hath defiled his neighbour's wife, neither hath come near to a menstruous woman,**

Our God never means to make it too difficult to follow His law. Having warned that the sinner would die, He reminds His people what following Him looks like. This is what it means to be "just" (Heb. *tsadiq*, tsah-DEEK), "lawful" (Heb. *mishpat*, meesh-POT), and "right" (Heb. *tsedaqah*, tseh-daw-KAH). The Hebrew words translated here as "just" and "right" come from a root meaning true or straight, and refers to being in right relationship with God. The Hebrew translated here as "lawful" is in a word family related to judging and judgments. These are God's pronouncements of the law. If a person lives by these true judgments, they will live at peace with God. The prophecy continues with two further examples of righteous conduct. To have "eaten upon the mountains" is to have partaken of pagan sacrifices. Worshipers would usually not burn up an entire animal as a sacrifice, but would eat much of the meat. Worship usually took place in a high place, like on a mountain. If one has not eaten on the mountains or lifted their eyes to idols, they are free from idolatry. This righteous man's relationship with Yahweh is pure, and his marriage is also pure. He has not committed adultery with his neighbor's wife (Leviticus 18:20), and he has not had sex with his wife during her period (Leviticus 18:19). It is important to keep his marriage pure because marriage is a revelation of God's relationship with His people (Ezekiel 16:1-8; Ephesians 5:31-33).

**7 And hath not oppressed any, but hath restored to the debtor his pledge, hath spoiled none by violence, hath given his bread to the hungry, and hath covered the naked with a garment; 8 He that hath not given forth upon usury, neither hath taken any increase, that hath withdrawn his hand from iniquity, hath executed true judgment between man and man,**

The righteous person, as the prophecy future explains, is kind to his neighbor, especially when it comes to money. His actions related to giving loans is all exactly in keeping with the law. God's law explains that if a person taking a loan from you gives you a "pledge" or form of collateral that he'll need (like a cloak), it should be given back at night (Exodus 22:26- 27; Deuteronomy 24:12-13). "Giving on usury" and "taking an increase" have to do with the interest charged on a loan. God is clear that the poor should not be charged any interest at all on a loan (Leviticus 25:35-37), so this righteous man does not. He also does not violently steal (KJV: "spoil"), in keeping with the law (Exodus 20:15). Instead, he is generous to those in need, whether they need food or clothes. He also withdraws himself from evil, and helps his fellow Israelites settle disputes fairly. All of these actions ensure that the righteous person will be in right relationship with everyone: with God, with spouse, with community.

**9 Hath walked in my statutes, and hath kept my judgments, to deal truly; he is just, he shall surely live, saith the Lord GOD.**

In summary, the righteous person obeys God's law. He "walked" in them, following them in every aspect of his life, and he has "kept" them, stalwartly watching himself so that he stays in line. This is the way to remain "just" (Heb. tsadiq) before the Lord. If a person aims to stay true to God, he will live, God promises. It does not matter what people do around you, even your own kin. Every action in these verses has been something anyone can do, no matter what others are doing to them.

**30 Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways, saith the Lord GOD. Repent, and turn yourselves from all your transgressions; so iniquity shall not be your ruin.**

Although Israel is punished as a community, God still judges individuals based on their response. Although individual sin can affect the whole community, yet the righteous are usually rewarded for their righteousness. God has an excellent track record of sparing singularly righteous followers even amid a community-wide judgment, for example Noah (Genesis 6:8), Lot (Genesis 19:16), and Rahab (Joshua 6:17). God has always judged on an individual basis.

Now comes the climax of the passage: "Repent, and turn yourselves from all of your transgressions; so iniquity shall not be your ruin." The word "repent" is a translation of the Hebrew word shub (SHOOV), which means turning, or to turn back, to go or come back. It carries the idea of making a right-about turn, to retreat from a certain direction to another. Here it involves turning from their way of sin (transgression) to the way of righteousness. The word "transgression" is the Hebrew noun pasha' (PEH-shah) derived from the verb pasha' (pah-SHAH), which means to break away from authority, to trespass, revolt, rebel, or apostatize. Transgression can be against an individual, a nation, or against God. In context, the rebellion is against God and His ordinances. The Lord invites Israel to turn away from sin and to return to Him so that "iniquity shall not be your ruin." The Lord, through the prophet, calls on the people to turn over a new leaf so that they can live and not die.

**31 Cast away from you all your transgressions, whereby ye have transgressed; and make you a new heart and a new spirit: for why will ye die, O house of Israel?**

Using a stronger word, the Lord invites them to "cast away" or to get rid of their transgression, and to cultivate "a new heart and a new spirit" so that they will not face the consequences of their transgression. This is a call to transform the inner self. To "cast away" is another way of saying that they should turn away from their rebellion and come back to Him. Emphasizing the need for repentance, the Lord appeals to their reasoning. He does this rhetorically—"for why will ye die, O house of Israel?" In other words, life and death are your choice. You can choose to repent and live or continue in your sin and face death. In a way, here, God is renewing His covenant with Israel, since this language is similar to that of Deuteronomy (30:19). The conditions for salvation are consistent both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament (Acts 2:38; 26:18; Romans 10:9-10; 2 Corinthians 5:17-21).

**32 For I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth, saith the Lord GOD: wherefore turn yourselves, and live ye.**

Concluding this oracle, the Lord reiterates His earlier assertion (v. 23) that He does not take delight in the death of the wicked or the righteous who turn away from His righteousness. Rather, He calls again for genuine repentance and change of heart—the only criterion for living.

# Daily Bible Readings

## **MONDAY**

Treat Each Other Fairly  
(Deuteronomy 24:14–18)

## **TUESDAY**

Taking Personal Responsibility  
(Jeremiah 31:27–30)

## **WEDNESDAY**

The Child Who Sins Suffers Punishment  
(Ezekiel 18:10–13)

## **THURSDAY**

The Righteous Child Is Rewarded  
(Ezekiel 18:14–18)

## **FRIDAY**

All Are Accountable for Their Sins  
(Ezekiel 18:19–24)

## **SATURDAY**

God Is Compassionate and Fair  
(Ezekiel 18:25–29)

## **SUNDAY**

Repent and Live Righteous Lives  
(Ezekiel 18:1–9, 30–32)