

HOSEA NO. 5
November 27th, 1988
The Fathers' Iniquity Upon the Children

Hosea 1:2-7; 2:4; 4:6,13-14; 9:12-13; 10:14; 13:16

There is a bitter fact often enough mentioned by the prophets, but usually ignored by us. Multitudes of children either suffered terribly or were slain when the judgment of God fell upon Israel for her betrayal of God's covenant. The prophets tell us this plainly, indeed, do not mince their words that this too is a measure of the ferocity of God's wrath when it has been provoked by the betrayal of his people and by their contempt for him and for his law. The parents fall and the children with them.

What is more; those who were adults at the time of the Assyrian desolation of Israel, who were carted off into exile by their Assyrian conquerors never to be heard from again, were many of them children during the great prosperity of the reign of Jeroboam II, when Hosea first began to preach divine judgment. And, those children were raised in ungodly, worldly, and superstitious homes, received all of their spiritual instruction from ungodly and spiritually blind priests and prophets, and never knew anything except the worship of God which had by this time been so terribly undermined and perverted. No wonder they became the spiritual incarnation of their parents; no wonder they continued the national defection from God's covenant; no wonder they perpetuated the rebellion against God which their ancestors had begun and their parents continued.

Jeroboam II was long dead by the time the axe fell upon his kingdom and people; but his children—his natural children and his political children were alive to get it in the neck.

That the children perish for the fathers' sins; that children suffer the consequences of their parents defection from God's covenant; that parents reproduce their own spiritual character in their children—all of this is a major theme in the prophets and in Hosea's prophecy in particular. It is a theme we particularly need to attend to because, I believe, we are both by constitution and upbringing inclined to avoid and ignore this truth, however plainly the Bible speaks to it.

It seems somehow neither right nor possible to us, born and bred in ‘every man for himself’ America, where the principles of individualism are so sacred, that God should attach so much importance and suspend so much of eternal significance upon the solidarity of the family and of the family line.

In fact, quite honestly, we have perhaps all of us, at one time or another, protested against this biblical doctrine, if not with our lips, then with our hearts. It does not strike us that children should suffer for their parents’ sins; this seems unjust. And does not, we ask, the Scripture itself say that each one shall die for his own sin?

We begin our investigation of this subject with Calvin who begins where we ought always to begin in our investigation of the ways of the Almighty: ‘... if it be not agreeable to our judgment,’ he wrote, ‘that God should repay every one according to his deserts, and yet that He at the same time requires the sins of their fathers of the children, we should remember that His judgments are a great depth; and, therefore, if anything in His dealings is incomprehensible to us, we must bow to it with sobriety and reverence.’ [Commentary on Pentateuch, II, p 115]

That is the attitude with which we ought always to study and receive the teaching of God’s Word. But, now, there are at least four points which can be made by way both of elucidation and explanation on the one hand, and defense on the other, about this doctrine that the sins of the fathers become the inheritance and the responsibility of their children.

I. In the first place, simply put: it is a fact.

This principle of family solidarity in sin and judgment is everywhere to be seen in our world. It cannot be gainsaid.

It is seen on the national level, as one generation of citizens must pay for the foolishness or cupidity or wickedness of its parents. It surely seems, does it not, that we in this country are ready to bequeath to our children, a nation mired in many pits: political, economic, moral, and spiritual—but they, to a large extent, not we ourselves, will have to pay the price of our actions—whether that price is the terror and death of a collapsing social order or of conquest by a more powerful aggressor.

It is seen, at the same time, on the most personal and individual level—in the exquisite tragedy of a baby born to an addict mother who has an addiction to drugs already itself; or to a baby born with AIDS caught from its drug addict

or prostitute mother. It is seen in the way that parents abuse children and, in that way, often ruin their children's lives; it is also seen in the way that abused children and children of alcoholics and children of divorced parents so often repeat the behavior of their parents when they themselves marry and have children.

More subtly, but none the less really, many of the defects of our characters, yours and mine, first lived in our parents, and we can already see some of them being handed on to our children. 'Like father, like son' is very often in this world not good news.

But, how much more so in the spiritual realm. The Bible is chock-full of examples and countless more could be added from the church's life since.

The line of Cain was a succession of one unspiritual, proud, and defiant man after another. And, then, the great history of the people of Israel is chiefly concerned with the rolling momentum of her unbelief, generation after generation her rebellion against God becoming more complete, until finally his judgment fell.

Indeed, even when it is believing parents who sire and raise the ungodly, the Scripture seems to take care to point out to us, how the sin of the parent has come home to roost in the life and behavior of his child.

So we are told that Eli never restrained his sons, Hophni and Phinehas, who thus became the wicked priests who led Israel to doom at the hands of the Philistines; and when we learn that Adonijah revolted against his father, King David, the Bible is careful to add the explanatory note: 'David had never interfered with him by asking, "Why do you behave as you do?"' And, it is surely no coincidence, that we are introduced to Manasseh, Judah's terribly wicked king, just after having been told of how his father, King Hezekiah, though otherwise a righteous man, had behaved proudly before the Lord and had, therefore, received word that because of his pride, judgment would fall upon his kingdom after he was dead. And this Hezekiah, the Scripture relates to us in shocked undertones, accepted as good news for he thought, 'at least in my lifetime things will go well.' Is it any wonder that such self-centered behavior and such an unspiritual mind as that should produce a Manasseh?!

No, it is a fact of Biblical history and of simple observation that children suffer for their parents' sins and that they follow the unbelieving and rebellious example their parents have set for them and thus perpetuate the very

behavior which will finally bring down the divine judgment.

II. In the second place, this principle of family solidarity in sin and judgment, is made the basis of much explicit teaching and many warnings in the Bible.

God cannot be accused of leaving us in the dark about this matter; of not having given adequate warning of the responsibility parents bare for the lives of their children or of the consequences of their behavior for their children.

In the second of the ten commandments God said: ‘I the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me. . . .’ And the Lord quickly demonstrated his intention to fulfil that promise.

After the Israel’s sin with the golden calf at the foot of Mt Sinai, the Lord said to Israel: ‘Your children will be shepherds here for forty years, suffering for your unfaithfulness, until the last of your bodies lies in the desert.’ [Numbers 14:33] Later he ordered that no Ammonite or Moabite or any of his descendants may enter the assembly of the Lord, *even down to the tenth generation*, because the Ammonites and Moabites did not help Israel in the wilderness, but rather opposed her.

This promise, this doctrine, this aspect of divine judgment and justice was so clearly stated in the Word of God, and so emphasized that it could find a place in the prayer of godly people. Listen to this prayer of Jeremiah’s [32:17-19]:

“Ah, Sovereign Lord, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you. You show love to thousands but bring the punishment for the fathers’ sins into the laps of their children after them. O great and powerful God, whose name is the Lord Almighty, great are your purposes and mighty are your deeds.”

Remember that Hosea amounts to a lawsuit which God is bringing against his people: it contains the charge that they have betrayed his covenant, the evidence to back up that charge and prove it true, and finally the pronouncement of the judgment which would befall this guilty people. And that judgment is, in every case, just the various curses which God long ago

promised to visit upon his people should they prove unfaithful to him—and one of those curses is just this one: that the sins of the fathers would be visited upon the children.

We may sometimes chafe under the divine intention to bring the punishment of the sins of the fathers upon the children, but what we cannot say is that God has failed to warn us that such will be the case. He has spoken very clearly.

III. In the third place, this solidarity of the family in sin and judgment is, after all, according to truth and to justice.

It is not as if Hosea is speaking of God's punishment being visited upon *innocent* children for the sins of their fathers; as if the children were righteous and grew up to be followers of God, but they were destroyed anyway because of what their parents had done or failed to do some years before.

No, Hosea makes the point explicitly that there is a solidarity in sin before there is a solidarity in judgment.

In 4:13, for example, he points out that because their parents deserted the Lord, the daughters turn to prostitution and the daughters-in-law to adultery. Then, the Lord says, 'Shall I not punish your daughters and your daughters-in law?'

The children became sinners, following their parents and thus it was both for their parents' sins and their own sins that they were punished.

As you may remember, this fact that God does visit the sins of the fathers upon the children, was, in the days of the prophets, turned into an excuse by the Israelites. They were saying that God's judgment wasn't really their fault, it was their father's fault. Indeed, there was even a proverb which expressed their self-justifying attitude: 'the fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth have been set on edge.'

And the prophets, Jeremiah and Ezekiel prominent among them, take pains to disabuse the people of the delusion that they could blame the fall of Israel and Judah on their parents and claim innocence themselves. Indeed, they call upon the people to repent, saying that God will withdraw his hand of judgment if they do; but, of course, the children were as faithless and hardhearted as their parents and had no intention of humbling themselves before the Lord. They were interested only in justifying themselves and

escaping any blame for the calamity which was overtaking the nation.

And even with the little ones who die because their parents are being judged by God, the ones too little to have established for themselves their parents' pattern of rebellion against God, the rest of the Scripture teaches us to understand that God will mete out a perfect judgment, and that in those cases concerning which the Scripture does not speak or speak clearly, we can trust the judge of all the earth to do right.

So, whatever else we may think or feel about this biblical doctrine of the solidarity of the family in sin and judgment, we must say that it is a fact everywhere to be observed—we may wish it were not, but it is; that God has plainly taught us his intention to visit the sins of the fathers upon the children and that in this too, all of his judgments are true and right in Him there is no darkness at all.

IV. But, there is one thing more we must say of this doctrine and this reality; and that is that it is matched or paralleled in the Word of God and in the experience of the church with a yet greater reality of a much happier sort—that if there is a family solidarity in sin and judgment, it is no less the case, indeed, it is still more the case, that there is a family solidarity in faith and salvation.

The grace and mercy of God not only can break the connection between sinful and faithless parents and their children, by reaching down to save the children and give them new life in Christ; but, still more, those now godly children can, by God's great mercy and covenant, pass on to their children, not sin and death, but faith and eternal life in Christ.

This too, is not only plainly asserted everywhere in the Bible, but illustrated as well. The line of Cain may have produced a succession of rebels against God, but the line of his godly brother Seth produced godly men and women, including Enoch and Noah. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph; Boaz, Jesse, David and Solomon; Lois, Eunice, and Timothy; are but three of many such biblical examples of godly successions.

And in the same commandment where God threatens to punish to the third and fourth generation of them that hate him, he goes on to say, 'but I, the Lord your God, will show love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.'

Where sin abounds—to the third or fourth generation; grace much more

abounds, to the thousandth generation!

How often we read of this promise and this hope in the Bible: 'from everlasting to everlasting the Lord's love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children's children—with those who keep his covenant and remember to obey his precepts.'

The Lord tells us in Malachi 2:15 that he brings godly men and women together in marriage in order to produce a godly offspring for himself! And he says, in a still stronger way, in Ezekiel 16:20-21 that the children of his people are 'his children, born to him.' So it ought to be no surprise to find him promising to honor the godly nurture of those children, the righteous instruction of them in the home and in the church, and the example of true spirituality set for them by their parents, their ministers, and their fellow believers in the body of Christ.

Don't mistake the Scripture here: it is not as though the Word of God is teaching us that we have our children's salvation in our own hands; or that we can earn it with our own efforts. No! But God has determined that his grace and mercy, that Christ's righteousness and the Spirit's gift of true faith in the Lord Jesus will be given in the lines of generations, as his children who are parents faithfully bring the good news by word and deed to his children who are their children.

'I will be a God to you and to your children after you,' there is the promise! And the means of its realization follows shortly thereafter: 'I have chosen Abraham so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.'

This is always God's way. He wishes his people to know of their duty to teach, to nurture, to discipline their children in the most holy faith. He gives them these commandments: they must teach their children his holy Word; they must exemplify before their children a life consecrated to Christ; and they must take care to rule their children in the Lord's name, so as to accustom them to and make them cheerfully submissive to the lordship and rule of the Lord Christ himself.

And then to steel them and hearten them and nerve them and motivate them to that constant and tiring and difficult and frustrating work, he first warns them that the sins of the fathers will be visited upon the children unto the

third and fourth generation; that their failure to keep his commandments as parents God will not fail to visit upon their children.

But, being the God of mercy and love that he is, he then adds to his warning the great promise and wins them to the work of raising God's children for God by assuring them that godly nurture, faithfully performed and bathed in prayer, will not fail to obtain the hoped for result: your children joining you in the kingdom of God and the church of Christ and eventually taking your hand again at the throne of God in heaven.

So heed God's warning—parents, parents-to-be, and all others who have in any way the charge of God's children in the church—heed that warning which he has not hesitated to fulfil in the life of his people when they have betrayed his covenant and rejected his love and mercy. He will visit the sins of the fathers. . . . But, much more heed his promise and throw yourselves again into that most important of all earthly tasks with new resolve, heartened and encouraged by the promise that God's love extends to the thousandth generation of those who love him and keep his commandments.

I have been enjoying these past few days, Stephen Hawking's book, A Brief History of Time. Hawking, as you may remember is the Cambridge University physicist to whom we owe the verification of the existence of 'black holes' in space. In this book, Hawking beautifully summarizes what is known of the universe and its origin and the principles of its physical existence and motion and describes how this present understanding developed from Copernicus to Newton to Einstein and beyond. Though Hawking is not a Christian, it is a book which well serves to remind us that John Calvin wished that all Christians could be astronomers, precisely because the immensities of space and the complexities of nature were such perfect mirrors of the genius and the omnipotence of God.

Hawking finishes with some speculations about the possibility of science uncovering what may be called a 'unified theory'—an explanation of the universe which is consistent and complete, accounting for the physics of subatomic particles and of galaxies in space and of the relationships between. So far, such a theory has eluded science. I tell you quite cheerfully, that the whole subject eludes me, the questions as well as the answers.

But, if Stephen Hawking is to be believed, and I quote him: 'if we do discover a complete theory. . . then we shall all be able to take part in the discussion of the question of why it is that we and the universe exist. If we find the

answer to that, it would be the ultimate triumph of human reason—for then we would know the mind of God.’

How sad! this brilliant astrophysicist is investing his God given brilliance in the search for a scientific discovery that, he thinks, will bring us near to the mind of God. How sad! Many simple people who cannot understand relativity even when it is carefully explained to them already know the mind of God, already know why God made the world and what he intends to do with it when its day is done. The believing church has always known these things, because God himself has told us in his Word.

And knowing the mind of God already, we can confidently say that, as worthy and important as Professor Hawking’s investigations may be, the far more important task, the far more significant work, is being done by the Christian mother or father who teaches children of Christ and his salvation, who gathers the children round at table and at bedside to cultivate their habits of depending upon God in prayer and worshiping him and giving thanks; who by oversight, instruction, and discipline cultivates a will in those children which is submissive to God; who helps these children to form while still young the habits of loyalty to God’s house, of speaking of Christ to the lost, of the stewardship of money for Christ’s sake, of the denial of the flesh and of the world and resistance to the devil which will make them good soldiers and servants of God, and who, with God’s warning and his promise still sounding in their ears, strive with might and main to set an example before the children of so spiritual and so beautiful a life of faith, hope, and love that the children will want nothing so much for themselves.

And those children will have children and think and believe and do the same; and their children in turn and so when Stephen Hawking is but a footnote in a physics textbook, new life in Christ will be rising up and heading on toward the thousandth generation.

Thus saith the Lord!