

Ezekiel Chapter Eighteen

Principles of the Divine Government

by Harry A. Ironside

There are certain great principles that run throughout Scripture. Of these, two are outstanding: namely, grace and government. In every dispensation all who have ever been saved were saved by God's free grace. Grace is not only unmerited favor, but also it is favor to those who have merited the very opposite. God has dealt with repentant sinners in grace because of the redemptive work of our Lord Jesus Christ. That work had a backward and a forward aspect as we are told in Romans 3:24-26: "Being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in His blood, to declare His righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; to declare, I say, at this time His righteousness: that He might be just, and the Justifier of him which believeth in Jesus." The expression "for the remission of sins that are past" might better be rendered "for the pretermission of sins." That is, the meaning is not simply that God now forgives our past sins when we believe in the Lord Jesus, but also He forgave or remitted the sins of those who lived in past ages, before Christ died, in view of the work He was pledged to perform. And now, because of that finished work, God can be just, and the Justifier of all who have faith in Him who was delivered for our offences and raised again for our justification.

But grace does not set aside government. All believers today are under the government of God the Father who, without respect of persons, judgeth according to every man's work (1 Peter 1:17). It is true today, as in past ages, that whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap (Galatians 6:7). This is true of all men whether saints or sinners. There are temporal consequences that follow sin, which may go on all through life, even though God has forgiven the sin itself; as in David's case. Nathan said by divine authority, "The Lord also hath put away thy sin." But he added, "The sword shall never depart from thine house" (2 Samuel 12:7-15).

It is important to understand this in order that one may not misconstrue the teaching of this chapter, as also of chapter 33, in this same book. Both have to do with the divine government in this world and not with the question of how a guilty sinner may be cleansed from his sin and saved for eternity.

Let us look, then, at the opening section.

"The word of Jehovah came unto me again, saying, 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? As I live, saith the Lord Jehovah, ye shall not have occasion any more to use this proverb in Israel. 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" (verses 1-4).

The people of Israel, notably Judah, at this time sought to impugn the righteousness of God in visiting temporal judgments upon them, on the ground that He was punishing them for the sins of their fathers; whereas they themselves were guiltless of any offences that deserved such drastic measures as God was taking with them, "The fathers" they said, "have eaten sour grapes, and the

children's teeth are set on edge."

But God justified His governmental dealings with them from the very opposite standpoint. He was the moral Governor of the world. All men (souls) should be subject to Him because He created them all. He deals with each one individually according to his record or behavior. Therefore, "the soul that sinneth, it shall die." This was what the law declared. God had said, "He that doeth these things shall live in them" (Leviticus 18:5). This was not a promise of eternal life in heaven, but of long life on the earth to him who was obedient to the divine law. The violation of that law exposed one to the penalty of death.

But God who is long-suffering and merciful did not visit this penalty upon the offender immediately. He left room for repentance and reformation of life, as so often illustrated in His dealings with men. So He shows how ready He is to pardon and set aside the immediate judgment of physical death if there be evidence of a changed attitude on the part of the offender. Wherever men are found who endeavor to do what is just and right toward God and their fellows, they are promised life even though none can claim to have kept the law in every point.

"But if a man be just, and do that which is lawful and right, and hath not eaten upon the mountains, neither hath lifted up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, neither hath denied his neighbor's wife, neither hath come near to a woman in her impurity, and hath not wronged any, but hath restored to the debtor his pledge, hath taken nought by robbery, hath given his bread to the hungry, and hath covered the naked with a garment; he that hath not given forth upon interest, neither hath taken any increase, that hath withdrawn his hand from iniquity, hath executed true justice between man and man, hath walked in My statutes, and hath kept Mine ordinances, to deal truly; he is just, he shall surely live, saith the Lord Jehovah" (verses 5-9).

"If a man be just"; that is, if one behaves himself righteously. If he walks uprightly and his life is one of integrity and moral rectitude, God takes note of this, and He deals with man accordingly.

If one shuns idolatry, keeps himself from immorality of every kind, deals honorably with all men so that his business affairs are above reproach, is charitable toward and considerate of the poor and needy, and has endeavored to deal truly with all men, honoring the law of God by obedience to its precepts, then he may know that "he shall surely live, saith the Lord Jehovah." Do not confuse this with the gospel. This has to do with blessing on earth, not with things eternal.

But what if a man has been characterized by the virtues described in verses 5 to 9, and has a son who, presuming on God's favor to his father, becomes lax as to morals and careless as to his manner of living? Will the righteousness of his father avail to shield him from the judgment of God? The answer is given in the next paragraph.

"If he beget a son that is a robber, a shedder of blood, and that doeth any one of these things, and that doeth not any of those duties, but even hath eaten upon the mountains, and denied his neighbor's wife, hath wronged the poor and needy, hath taken by robbery, hath not restored the pledge, and hath lifted up his eyes to the idols, hath committed abomination, hath given forth upon interest, and hath taken increase; shall he then live? He shall not live: he hath done all these abominations; he shall surely die; his blood shall be upon him" (verses 10-13).

Hezekiah was such an one as the father, mentioned above. Manasseh, his ungodly son, is well depicted in the description given here. Alas, that the children of upright parents do not always walk

in the ways of their fathers! Where such is not the case the son must answer to God individually for his own wickedness. So, no matter how good a father may have been, if his son turns away from the teaching and example of his sire and plunges into licentiousness, idolatry, extortion and other vices, he will be punished accordingly; “He shall surely die; his blood shall be upon him.” He cannot blame anyone else for his suffering. He brings it down upon his own head.

Just as a righteous father’s good behavior will not shield a stubborn and rebellious son from the divine government, so a wicked father’s offences will not hinder God from dealing kindly with a son who repents and turns to Him.

“Now, lo, if he beget a son, that seeth all his father’s sins, which he hath done, and feareth, and doeth not such like; that hath not eaten upon the mountains, neither hath lifted up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, hath not defiled his neighbor’s wife, neither hath wronged any, hath not taken aught to pledge, neither hath taken by robbery, but hath given his bread to the hungry, and hath covered the naked with a garment; that hath withdrawn his hand from the poor, that hath not received interest nor increase, hath executed Mine ordinances, hath walked in My statutes; he shall not die for the iniquity of his father, he shall surely live. As for his father, because he cruelly oppressed, robbed his brother, and did that which is not good among his people, behold, he shall die in his iniquity” (verses 14-18).

God the righteous Ruler over men takes note of the piety and obedience of a son, even though his father may have been very wicked and ungodly. Where the son seeks to obey the divine precepts and to shun iniquitous behavior, God will reward him accordingly. If he learns by the folly of his father that it is indeed an evil and a bitter thing to plunge headlong into lasciviousness and corruption, that God is displeased with one who oppresses the poor or is indifferent to their needs and turns a deaf ear to their pitiful plea for assistance, and so looks compassionately upon the poverty-stricken and shares his wealth with them, while endeavoring to keep himself morally clean, “he shall surely live.” The wicked father will be judged, but the upright son will be honored of God: therefore the proverb they used to excuse themselves and to blame God for their troubles was not true.

“Yet say ye, Wherefore doth not the son bear the iniquity of the father? When the son hath done that which is lawful and right, and hath kept all My statutes, and hath done them, he shall live. The soul that sinneth, it shall die: the son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son; the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him” (verses 19, 20).

In this sense the son did not bear the iniquity of the father. His teeth were not set on edge because the father had eaten sour grapes. But each one had to give his own individual account unto God who dealt with him according to the righteous or unrighteous way in which he conducted himself.

Nor does this principle contradict the revelation given by God to Moses in which He spoke of Himself as “visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate Me; and showing mercy unto thousands of them that love Me, and keep My commandments” (Exodus 20:5-6). There is a fearful entail of physical weakness and often of spiritual blindness in which the children of ungodly, immoral parents participate. But even these children will find God ready to bless if they themselves turn from their iniquity. But let none presume upon God being better than His Word. Remember that if one chooses to turn from the path of rectitude to that of lawlessness he must suffer accordingly, “the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him.”

“But if the wicked turn from all his sins that he hath committed, and keep all My statutes, and do that which is lawful and right, he shall surely live, he shall not die. None of his transgressions that he hath committed shall be remembered against him: in his righteousness that he hath done he shall live. Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked? saith the Lord Jehovah; and not rather that he should return from his way, and live? But when the righteous turneth away from his righteousness, and committeth iniquity, and doeth according to all the abominations that the wicked man doeth, shall he live? None of his righteous deeds that he hath done shall be remembered: in his trespass that he hath trespassed, and in his sin that he hath sinned, in them shall he die” (verses 21-24).

In order that none may misunderstand, God, as it were, repeats Himself in a most clear and definite manner. Painstakingly He reiterates what has been set forth already, that none may despair, no matter how far from Him they have wandered. He has no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather desires that everyone should return from his evil way and so find the path of life.

The two roads—that of wickedness and that of right-living—are portrayed clearly. Each man can choose for himself which one he will take. But let him be assured of this, that if he turns away from righteousness none of his past good behavior shall avail to save him from death. He will die in his trespass that he has trespassed, and in his sin that he has sinned.

“Yet ye say, The way of the Lord is not equal. Hear now, O house of Israel: Is not My way equal? are not your ways unequal? When the righteous man turneth away from his righteousness, and committeth iniquity, and dieth therein; in his iniquity that he hath done shall he die. Again, when the wicked man turneth away from his wickedness that he hath committed, and doeth that which is lawful and right, he shall save his soul alive. Because he considered, and turneth away from all his transgressions that he hath committed, he shall surely live, he shall not die. Yet saith the house of Israel, The way of the Lord is not equal. O house of Israel, are not My ways equal? are not your ways unequal? Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways, saith the Lord Jehovah. Return ye, and turn yourselves from all your transgressions; so iniquity shall not be your ruin. Cast away from you all your transgressions, wherein ye have transgressed; and make you a new heart and a new spirit: for why will ye die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth, saith the Lord Jehovah: wherefore turn yourselves, and live” (verses 25-32).

All is summed up in this stirring paragraph. Israel’s complaint against God is answered fully, and the integrity of His government is defended. They had said, “The way of the Lord is not equal”; whereas it was their ways that were unequal. They were blaming God for their afflictions when they should have blamed themselves.

Although suffering under His hand because of their past departure from Him, it was not yet too late to turn back to Him, the source of all blessing. If they would do this, although captives among their enemies, iniquity should not be their ruin, but they would find God waiting to be gracious to them. An entirely new attitude on their part would enable Him to undertake for them in righteousness and yet in mercy and loving-kindness. He yearned over them and reminded them once more that He had no pleasure in the death of him that dieth. Therefore He pleaded, crying, “Why will ye die, O house of Israel? Wherefore turn yourselves, and live.” Where there was response to this plea and true repentance and turning to God in faith, they would indeed be born again. But the great theme of the chapter is government, rather than saving grace.