

DOES GOD PUNISH CHILDREN FOR THEIR PARENTS SIN?

There can be no error in the judgment of God whose throne is the very symbol of perfect justice. He will never without a justifiable reason punish children for the sins of their parents. Nor will he absolve parents from the guilt of their children where they are partakers of their children's sins. Men only need to learn and understand the ways of God and subject themselves to His will.

Sin is the breaking of the law of God. The apostle John wrote: "Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law." – 1 John 3:4

Sin came into the world when Adam disobeyed God by breaking His law in the Garden of Eden. And the penalty was death. Since then all his offspring have not only been born into this world with the stain of sin, which in some religious circles is termed "the original sin", but have also been dying. As it is written: "Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned." – Romans 5:12

Apart from the inherited or original sin, men do commit acts of wickedness: they steal, some even with violence; they tell lies even in the name of God; they covet their neighbour's belongings; they commit fornication, adultery and murder; they take bribe and pervert justice; they engage in witchcraft and other diabolical practices, and they oppress the poor and do so many other evil things contrary to the law of God. Indeed, many a man, in the language of the Holy Scriptures, "drinks iniquity like water." – Job 15:16 Revised Standard Version.

It seems strange and irreconcilable with the justice of God that some wicked people should prosper, live long and not suffer in this life for their evil deeds. And Job said: "Why do the wicked live on, growing old and increasing in power? They see their children established around them, their offspring before their eyes. Their homes are safe and free from fear; the rod (punishment) of God is not upon them... They send forth their children as a flock; their little ones dance about... They spend their years in prosperity and go down to the graves in peace." – Job 21:7-13, New International Version

Whatever prosperity or peace the wicked appears to have or enjoy is counterfeit, and it is temporal. To die without being in favour with God is a complete loss. And any wicked person who dies without suffering for his sins will surely be brought back at the resurrection of the dead to receive his due punishment. (Daniel 12:2; John 5:28, 29; Revelation 20:12-15 etc.) The Holy Bible shows clearly that those who are given to evil cannot escape the punishment of God except they repent, for "God is angry with the wicked every day." – Psalm 7:11

The wicked never enjoys the peace of God. Job himself asked: “How often is it that the lamp of the wicked is put out? That their calamity comes upon them? That God distributes pains in His anger?” (Job 21:17, Revised Standard Version) And King Solomon stated: “As righteousness *tendeth* to life: so he that pursueth evil *pursueth it* to his own death. *Though* hand *join* in hand, the wicked shall not be unpunished: but the seed of the righteous shall be delivered.” – Proverbs 11:19, 21 see also Isaiah 3:10, 11 and Galatians 6:7

Let us now examine some statements in the Bible that give the idea that God punished children for the iniquities of their fathers. Job among other things, stated: “It is said, ‘God stores up a man’s punishment for his sons.’ Let him repay the man himself, so that he will know it! Let his own eyes see his destruction; let him drink of the wrath of the Almighty” – Job 21:19, 20 New International Version

While addressing God Almighty, the prophet Jeremiah said: “Thou shewest lovingkindness unto thousands, and recompensest the iniquity of the fathers into the bosom of their children after them...” (Jeremiah 32:18) Earlier the prophet Moses said: “The LORD *is* longsuffering, and of great mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression, and by no means clearing *the guilty*, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth *generation*.” – Numbers 14:18

Critics

Some people criticize God over the foregoing statements, saying that it is unjust for Him to visit the sins of fathers upon the children even up to the fourth generation. Indeed, anybody who takes these texts on the surface and in isolation will find it difficult to appreciate why God should punish some people for their parents’ sins. In matters that relate to God men ought to be wary rather than being rash in passing judgment or criticizing knowing that He is infinitely perfect and we men are imperfect. The prophet Moses said God, “*He is* the Rock, his work *is* perfect: for all his ways *are* judgment: a God of truth and without iniquity, just and right *is* he.” – Deuteronomy 32:4

Except mortal men are guided by God through His spirit they cannot understand Him Whose wisdom, justice and other attributes are infinite. It was Saint Paul who exclaimed: “O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable *are* his judgments, and his ways past finding out!” (Romans 11:33) And it is written: “For my thoughts *are* not your thoughts, neither *are* your ways my ways, saith the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.” – Isaiah 55:8, 9

William Cowper was right when he in his popular hymn “God moves in a mysterious way”, wrote:

“Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust Him for His grace...

“Blind unbelief is sure to err,
And scan His work in vain;
God is His own interpreter,
And He will make it plain.”

In the ten commandments which God gave to the children of Israel He said: “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of *any thing* that *is* in heaven above, or that *is* in the earth beneath, or that *is* in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God *am* a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth *generation* of them that hate me; And shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments.” – Exodus 20:4-6

The New English Bible renders part of verse 5 thus: “I punish the children for the sins of their fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me.” What we should understand from this is that it is generations of children who like their father do iniquity and show hatred for God by not keeping His commandments that He punishes. But where the children do not follow the evil ways of their wicked parents God will not punish them.

This was very well illustrated in God’s dealings with the children of Israel. He warned them that if they would not keep His laws He would punish them terribly. He said: “And ye shall perish among the heathen, and the land of your enemies shall eat you up. And they that are left of you shall pine away in their iniquity in your enemies’ lands; and also in the iniquities of their fathers shall they pine away with them. If they shall confess their iniquity, and the iniquity of their fathers... if then their uncircumcised hearts be humbled, and they then accept of the punishment of their iniquity: Then will I remember my covenant with Jacob, and also my covenant with Isaac, and also my covenant with Abraham will I remember; and I will remember the land.” – Leviticus 26:38-42

Unfortunately, it turned out that the Israelites were stubborn, disobedient and unrepentant. In spite of the wonders which God did for their sake in Egypt and which they saw for themselves, they were faithless. They provoked God to such an intolerable degree that He decided exterminate them and make a new and greater nation. But Moses interceded for them and God replied: “How long *shall I bear with* this evil congregation, which murmur against me? I have heard the murmurings of the children of Israel, which they murmur against me. Say unto them, *As truly as I live*, saith the LORD, as ye have spoken in mine ears, so will I do to you: Your carcases shall fall in this wilderness; and all that were numbered of you, according to your whole number, from twenty years old and upward, which have murmured against me... And your children shall wander in the wilderness forty years, and bear your whoredoms, until your carcases be wasted in the wilderness.” – Numbers 14:27-33

It could be recalled that Jesus Christ during his earthly ministry denounced the scribes and Pharisees from time to time. On one of such occasions he rebutted their claim that if they had lived at the time of their fathers they would not have killed the prophets of God as their fathers did. He told them that their actions belied their claim as they did worse things than their fathers,

and that they would for that reason suffer for their own sins and for the sins of their fathers. He then pronounced woe upon Jerusalem. (Matthew 23:29-39) What happened to that great city in A.D. 70 when the Roman army under General Titus marched against it is now history. And up till today some of the natural Jews, because of their unbelief, are still suffering the consequences of the sins of their fathers.

The Amalekites

Mention can also be made of the case of the Amalekites. Because their forefather Amalek “feared not God”, he attacked the weary Israelites from the rear as they fled from Egypt. Consequently, God Almighty swore that He would “have war with Amalek from generation to generation” until He would “utterly put out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven.” (Exodus 17:8-16; Deuteronomy 25:17-19) This divine judgment was not executed on the Amalekites until the days of King Saul. (I Samuel 15:1-33) They did not turn to God; rather they were given to the worship of idols contrary to God’s law. Therefore they did not deserve the mercy of God which is meant for those who love Him and keep His commandments. – Exodus 20:4-6

It must be pointed out that the issue of punishing the ungodly children of wicked parents is purely a prerogative of God Almighty to Whom vengeance belongs. We state this to warn those who may want to take the law in their hands to take vengeance on the children, even innocent children, of people who might have wronged them. God Himself said: “...Vengeance is mine; I will repay...” (Romans 12:19; Deuteronomy 32:35) And to the Jews He gave the law: “The fathers shall not be put to death for the children, neither shall the children be put to death for the fathers: every man shall be put to death for his own sin.” – Deuteronomy 24:16

King Amaziah, for instance observed this law in dealing with those who conspired and killed his father Joash. As it is written: “And it came to pass, as soon as the kingdom was confirmed in his hand, that he slew his servants which had slain the king his father. But the children of the murderers he slew not: according unto that which is written in the book of the law of Moses, wherein the LORD commanded, saying, The fathers shall not be put to death for the children, nor the children be put to death for the fathers; but every man shall be put to death for his own sin.” – 2 Kings 14:5, 6

Satan’s Oppression

It must be noted that it is not all sufferings that are attributed to the sins of one’s parents or to one’s own sins. Some are the result of the oppression of the devil. It could be recalled that on an occasion when “...*Jesus* passed by, he saw a man which was blind from *his* birth. And his disciples asked him, saying, Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind? *Jesus* answered, Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him.” – John 9:1-3

The Holy Bible is quite explicit on this issue of children suffering for the sins of their parents. God Himself made a comprehensive and lucid statement, to wit: “Consider the man who is righteous and does what is just and right... He conforms to my statutes and loyally observes my laws. Such

a man is righteous: he shall live, says the Lord. He may have a son who is a man of violence and a cut-throat who turns his back on these rules... Such a man shall not live. Because he has committed all these abominations he shall die, and his body will be in his head. This man may in turn have a son who sees all his father's sins; he sees, but he commits none of them... He keeps my laws and conforms to my statutes. Such a man shall not die for his father's wrong doing; he shall live." (Ezekiel 18:5-17, New English Bible) "Yet ye say, 'Why should not the son suffer for the iniquity of his father?' When the son has done what is lawful and right, and has been careful to observe all my statutes, he shall surely live. The soul that sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son; the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself." – Verses 19, 20, Revised Standard Version