

repent, God is quick to forgive and bless. Every man may be assured of this. Even if a man has very wicked parents, but lives himself a holy life, he will not be punished. God is merciful and gracious. But He is also perfectly just.

What then about corporate responsibility?

The way to escape such corporate guilt is to repent of it personally. And repentance means:

- 1) That one acknowledge his own part in the sin.
- 2) That one do what he can to eradicate the sin.
- 3) That he openly condemn the sin and show others why it is a sin against God.
- 4) That he not commit the same sin, but drive it out of his life, by Jehovah's grace.

There is another element in all this, however. God punishes sin with sin, lesser sins with greater sins, and He does this in generations. The sin of which a father, for example, is guilty is ultimately the responsibility of the children. God visits the iniquity of the fathers upon the children (Ex. 20:5). That responsibility is evident from the fact that the children commit the same sin not only but even magnify the sin in their own lives. Then the sin of their father becomes their sin as well, and when they are punished, their punishment is for their own sin.

I have repeatedly seen in other families and among my own relatives what this rule of God means. Parents with a family may, for some reason or another, leave the true church. They take their children along. They join a church where the gospel is not preached in all its purity. The children drift farther from the truth than their parents. And, in time and in future generations, the children do not even go to church any more.

If, however, there are a few who confess the sins of leaving the true church, turn from their sin in repentance and seek forgiveness in the cross, they will not be punished for their sins and will, by repentance, experience the blessings of escaping the judgment that comes upon their fathers.

There is always forgiveness and salvation to the one who turns from his evil way—even when it is the same evil way in which his parents walked. But such a one repents of this sin—and repents of his parents' sin when he turns from that wrong way.

Prof. Hanko

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Corporate Responsibility and Ezekiel 18

"The word of the LORD 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 GOD, ye shall not have occasion any more to use this proverb in Israel" (Eze. 18:1-3).

A brother writes, "Having read Prof. Hanko's explanation of federal responsibility in the *Covenant Reformed News*, this morning I read Ezekiel 18, which seems to directly contradict what he says. Perhaps he could address this passage."

The question is a good and important, and I am pleased that I have an opportunity to answer it.

The proverb to which the children of Israel referred, "Our fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge" (2), was used by the people who were in captivity. They had been brought there as a part of a band of Israelites taken to Babylon while Jehoahaz was king. A later captivity, when Zedekiah was king, was the final one. The seventy years Judah had to be in captivity began with the first captivity.

Ezekiel was brought into captivity along with the former band of captives and ministered to them at the River Chebar. He had a difficult time of it, for the captives were rebellious about their punishment. By quoting to Ezekiel this ancient proverb, they meant to say that they were in captivity unjustly. They had not done anything worthy of such a dreadful punishment. They did not hesitate to admit that their fathers had committed sins that made them worthy of captivity, but not they. And so, they complained, they were being unfairly punished for their fathers' sin. That was a terrible indictment of God's justice.

But the claim they made by quoting this proverb and the answer of the Lord shows that the proverb did not apply to them at all, and that, in fact, the proverb was not true.

It is, first of all, necessary to read the rest of the chapter. God makes several points in the chapter. The Lord emphatically makes the point that He is just and righteous in all His ways, and that if a man is just and righteous, he will not be punished. That is, if such a man thinks that he is totally sinless and yet must bear the punishment his fathers deserved, he is totally mistaken.

In fact, God says, that even if a man sins and repents of his sin, he will not be punished (21). A man dies for his own sin, not for anyone's else's sin.

Ezekiel 18 teaches that the will of God's command is that sinners repent of their sins, serve Him and keep His commandments. And if sinners turn from their sin and

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Leaving Bethlehem for Moab (2)

There is a vital spiritual lesson to be gleaned from Ruth 1:1-5 (we covered its history in the last issue of the *News*). This is not surprising since these verses are found in the Bible, which is an unashamedly religious book on knowing and serving the one, true and living God, revealed in Jesus Christ. “All scripture [including the first five verses of Ruth] is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness” (II Tim. 3:16).

Ruth 1 itself indicates the spiritual significance of its first five verses. First, we have references to three deaths in one small family (3, 5). That is ominous. Is God judging here? Judging for sin? The sin of leaving Israel?

Second, Ruth 1:1-5 is the only scene in the book in which the name of God is not mentioned. Could it be that this is a pointer? A pointer to the fact that, in moving from Bethlehem to Moab, Elimelech did not truly take God and His Word into account? This is leaving Almighty God out of a big issue, whether or not to stay in the church!

Third, the very first verse of Ruth states, “Now it came to pass in the days when the judges ruled...” Certainly, this is a temporal indicator, telling us when these events took place. Is it also a suggestion that the emigration of Elimelech and his family from Bethlehem to Moab is of a piece with the disobedience of that period? The latter chapters of the book of Judges contain variations of “In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes” (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). The context of these texts explains further the wickedness of those times. The famine in Ruth 1:1 was itself a judgment of God upon Israel for its sins (Deut. 28:23-24).

Together these first three factors are, to say the least, suggestive (three deaths, no reference to God in this scene alone in Ruth, and the dark days of the judges); the next two arguments are more explicit and are based on the words of Naomi and Ruth.

Naomi states that, in the death of her three menfolk, “the hand of the LORD is gone out against me” (Ruth 1:13) and “the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me” (20). “I went out full, and the LORD hath brought me home again empty: why then call ye me Naomi, seeing the LORD hath testified against me, and the Almighty hath afflicted me?” (21). The just God, of course, is right in so doing, for He is judging sin.

We also have Ruth’s beautiful and moving words to Naomi: “Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the LORD do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me” (16-17). If Ruth is right in moving to Israel from Moab, then Elimelech’s family were wrong in moving from Israel to Moab.

As well as the five indicators in Ruth 1, we should think about other, relevant, biblical teaching. First, departing from Israel for Moab is to leave God’s land, the land He gave His people, the land in which Jehovah dwelt. Elimelech’s family left the land God gave them in Bethlehem, which land was a sign of the heavenly inheritance.

Second, Elimelech’s family left God’s people. Many in Israel were wicked and unbelieving, and even the elect were not perfect, but the latter were the redeemed, called and believing people of God. This was a grievous sin, departing from the church of God and the communion of saints (*Heidelberg Catechism*, Q. & A. 54-55). Leaving the people of God is leaving the God of His people. Remember this, if ever you are tempted to leave the church, which is where the Lord dwells (I Tim. 3:15), and the fellowship of the saints, which is ultimately fellowship with the Triune God (I John 1:3)!

Third, Elimelech’s family left God’s office-bearers. They left the judges, prophets, priests and Levites whom God had placed in His Old Testament church. Today, to depart from a true church, manifesting the three marks of faithful preaching, sacramental administration and discipline (*Belgic Confession* 28-29), involves leaving pastors, through whom Christ teaches us; elders, through whom He rules and supervises us; and deacons, through whom He shows us mercy (*Belgic Confession* 30-31).

Fourth, Elimelech’s family left God’s worship at the tabernacle, where God had manifested His presence in the Shekinah glory. There the sacrifices were made, bespeaking the full and rich atonement made for our sins on the cross. For did Elimelech and his family *really* go up to all of the three pilgrimage feasts each of the “ten” or so years they spent in Moab (Ruth 1:4)? Sadly, many professing Christians today will accept a job in another part of the country or world, before even asking themselves if there is a good Reformed church there and without doing the requisite research.

Fifth, what about remembering God’s day and keeping the fourth commandment in Moab? How does one today keep the Lord’s Day holy when he or she has no faithful church to attend? Hebrews 10:25 exhorts us, “Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another.”

Sixth, Elimelech’s family left God. Leaving His land, His people, His office-bearers, His worship and His day is leaving God. In moving to Moab, Naomi left the Lord to some extent and for some years. Thankfully, she later confessed and returned to Israel.

Elimelech’s sin is condemned in *Belgic Confession* 28: “We believe, since this holy congregation is an assembly of those who are saved, and out of it there is no salvation, that no person, of whatsoever state or condition he may be, ought to withdraw himself to live in a separate state from it; but that all men are in duty bound to join and unite themselves with it, maintaining the unity of the church; submitting themselves to the doctrine and discipline thereof; bowing their necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ; and as mutual members of the same body, serving to the edification of the brethren, according to the talents God has given them. And that this may be the more effectually observed, it is the duty of all believers, according to the Word of God, to separate themselves from all those who do not belong to the church, and to join themselves to this congregation wheresoever God hath established it, even though the magistrates and edicts of princes be against it, yea, though they should suffer death or any other corporal punishment. Therefore all those who separate themselves from the same, or do not join themselves to it, act contrary to the ordinance of God.” *Rev. Stewart*