

CHAPTER 18

Perhaps, in reading some of the foregoing chapters, we may have been tempted to think ourselves not much concerned in them (though they also were written for our learning); but this chapter, at first view, appears highly and nearly to concern us all, very highly, very nearly; for, without particular reference to Judah and Jerusalem, it lays down the rule of judgment according to which God will deal with the children of men in determining them to their everlasting state, and it agrees with that very ancient rule laid down, ~~GENE~~ Genesis 4:7, "If though doest well, shalt thou not be accepted?" But, "if not, sin," the punishment of sin, "lies at the door." Here is,

I. The corrupt proverb used by the profane Jews, which gave occasion to the message here sent them, and made it necessary for the justifying of God in his dealings with them (v. 1-3).

II. The reply given to this proverb, in which God asserts in general his own sovereignty and justice (v. 4). Woe to the wicked; it shall be ill with them (v. 4, 20). But say to the righteous, It shall be ill with them (v. 4, 20). But say to the righteous, It shall be well with them (v. 5-9). In particular, as to the case complained of, he assures us,

1. That it shall be ill with a wicked man, though he had a good father (v. 10-13).

2. That it shall be well with a good man, though he had a wicked father (v. 14-18). And therefore in this God is righteous (v. 19, 20).

3. That it shall be well with penitents, though they began ever so ill (v. 21-23 and 27, 28).

4. That it shall be ill with apostates, though they began ever so well (v. 24, 26). And the use of all this is,

(1.) To justify God and clear the equity of all his proceedings (v. 25, 29).

(2.) To engage and encourage us to repent of our sins and turn to God (v. 30-32). And these are things which belong to our everlasting peace. O that we may understand and regard them before they be hidden from our eyes!

~~280~~ EZEKIEL 18:1-9

PROVERB OF THE SOUR GRAPES

Evil manners, we say, beget good laws; and in like manner sometimes unjust reflections occasion just vindications; evil proverbs beget good prophecies. Here is,

I. An evil proverb commonly used by the Jews in their captivity. We had one before (~~282~~Ezekiel 12:22) and a reply to it; here we have another. *That* sets God's justice at defiance: "*The days are prolonged and every vision fails; the threatenings are a jest.*" *This* charges him with injustice, as if the judgments executed were a wrong: "You use this proverb *concerning the land of Israel*, now that it is laid waste by the judgments of God, saying, *The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge*; we are punished for the sins of our ancestors, which is as great an absurdity in the divine regimen as if the children should have their teeth set on edge, or stupefied, by the fathers' eating sour grapes, whereas, in the order of natural causes, if men eat or drink any thing amiss, they only themselves shall suffer by it." Now,

1. It must be owned that there was some occasion given for this proverb. God had often said that he would *visit the iniquity of the fathers upon the children*, especially the sin of idolatry, intending thereby to express the evil of sin, of that sin, his detestation of it, and just indignation against it, and the heavy punishments he would bring upon idolaters, that parents might be restrained from sin by their affection to their children and that children might not be drawn to sin by their reverence for their parents. He had likewise often declared by his prophets that in bringing the present ruin upon Judah and Jerusalem he had an eye to the sins of Manasseh and other preceding kings; for, looking upon the nation as a body politic, and punishing them with national judgments for national sins, and admitting the maxim in our law that *a corporation never dies*, reckoning with them now for the iniquities of former ages was but like making a man, *when he is old, to possess the iniquities of his youth*, ~~283~~Job 13:26. And there is no unrighteousness with God in doing so. But,

2. They intended it as a reflection upon God, and an impeachment of his equity in his proceedings against them. Thus far that is right which is

implied in this proverbial saying, That those who are guilty of wilful sin *eat sour grapes*; they do that which they will feel from, sooner or later. The grapes may look well enough in the temptation, but they will be bitter as bitterness itself in the reflection. They will set the sinner's teeth on edge. When conscience is awake, and sets the sin in order before them, it will spoil the relish of their comforts as when the teeth are set on edge. But they suggest it as unreasonable that the children should smart for the fathers' folly and feel the pain of that which they never tasted the pleasure of, and that God was unrighteous in thus taking vengeance and could not justify it. See how wicked the reflection is, how daring the impudence; yet see how witty it is, and how sly the comparison. Many that are impious in their jeers are ingenious in their jests; and thus the malice of hell against God and religion is insinuated and propagated. It is here put into a proverb, and that proverb used, commonly used; they had it up ever and anon. And, though it had plainly a blasphemous meaning, yet they sheltered themselves under the similitude from the imputation of downright blasphemy. Now by this it appears that they were unhumbled under the rod, for, instead of condemning themselves and justifying God, they condemned him and justified themselves; but *woe to him that thus strives with his Maker*.

II. A just reproof of, and reply to, this proverb: *What mean you by using it?* That is the reproof. "Do you intend hereby to try it out with God? Or can you think any other than that you will hereby provoke him to be *angry with you will he has consumed you?* Is this the way to reconcile yourselves to him and make your peace with him?" The reply follows, in which God tells them,

1. That the use of the proverb should be taken away. This is said, it is sworn (v. 3): *You shall not have occasion any more to use this proverb*; or (as it may be read), *You shall not have the use of this parable*. The taking away of this parable is made the matter of a promise, ^{<26D>}Jeremiah 31:29. Here it is made the matter of a threatening. There it intimates that God will return to them in ways of mercy; here it intimates that God would proceed against them in ways of judgment. He will so punish them for this impudent saying that they shall not dare to use it any more; as in another case, ^{<26B>}Jeremiah 23:34, 36. God will find out effectual ways to silence those cavillers. Or God will so manifest both to themselves and others that they have wickedness of their own enough to bring all these desolating judgments upon them that they shall no longer for shame lay it upon the

sins of their fathers that they were thus dealt with: “Your own consciences shall tell you, and all your neighbours shall confirm it, that you yourselves have eaten the same sour grapes that your fathers ate before you, or else your teeth would not have been set on edge.”

2. That really the saying itself was unjust and a causeless reflection upon God's government. For,

(1.) God does not punish the children for the fathers' sins unless they tread in their fathers' steps and *fill up the measure of their iniquity* (^{<482>}Matthew 23:32), and then they have no reason to complain, for, whatever they suffer, it is less than their own sin has deserved. And, when God speaks of *visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children*, that is so far from putting any hardship upon the children, to whom he only renders *according to their works*, that it accounts for God's patience with the parents, whom he therefore does not punish immediately, because he *lays up their iniquity for their children*, ^{<821>}Job 21:19.

(2.) It is only in temporal calamities that children (and sometimes innocent ones) fare the worse for their parents' wickedness, and God can alter the property of those calamities, and make them work for good to those that are visited with them; but as to spiritual and eternal misery (and that is the death here spoken of) the children shall by no means smart for the parents' sins. This is here shown at large; and it is a wonderful piece of condescension that the great God is pleased to reason the case with such wicked and unreasonable men, that he did not immediately strike them dumb or dead, but vouchsafed to state the matter before them, that he may be clear when he is judged. Now, in his reply,

[1.] He asserts and maintains his own absolute and incontestable sovereignty: *Behold, all souls are mine*, v. 4. God here claims a property in all the souls of the children of men, one as well as another. *First*, Souls are his. He that is the Maker of *all things* is in a particular manner the *Father of spirits*, for his image is stamped on the souls of men; it was so in their creation; it is so in their renovation. He *forms the spirit of man within him*, and is therefore called *the God of the spirits of all flesh*, of embodied spirits. *Secondly*, All souls are his, all created by him and for him, and accountable to him. *As the soul of the father, so the soul of the son, is mine*. Our earthly parents are only the *fathers of our flesh*; our souls are not theirs; God challenges them. Now hence it follows, for the clearing of this matter,

1. That God may certainly do what he pleases both with fathers and children, and none may say unto him, *What doest thou?* He that gave us our being does us no wrong if he takes it away again, much less when he only takes away some of the supports and comforts of it; it is as absurd to quarrel with him as for *the thing formed to say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus?*

2. That God as certainly bears a good-will both to father and son, and will put no hardship upon either. We are sure that God hates nothing that he has made, and therefore (speaking of the adult, who are capable of acting for themselves) he has such a kindness for all souls that none die but through their own default. *All souls are his*, and therefore he is not partial in his judgment of them. Let us subscribe to his interest in us and dominion over us. He says, *All souls are mine*; let us answer, “Lord, my soul is thine; I devote it to thee to be employed for thee and made happy in thee.” It is with good reason that God says, “*My son, give me thy heart*, for it is my own,” to which we must yield, “*Father, take my heart*, it is thy own.”

[2.] Though God might justify himself by insisting upon his sovereignty, yet he waives that, and lays down the equitable and unexceptionable rule of judgment by which he will proceed as to particular persons; and it is this: — *First*, The sinner that persists in sin shall certainly die, his iniquity shall be his ruin: *The soul that sins shall die*, shall die as a soul can die, shall be excluded from the favour of God, which is the life and bliss of the soul, and shall lie for ever under his wrath, which is its death and misery. Sin is the act of the *soul*, the body being only the *instrument of unrighteousness*; it is called the *sin of the soul*, ³¹⁶Micah 6:7. And therefore the punishment of sin is the *tribulation and the anguish of the soul*, ³¹⁷Romans 2:9. *Secondly*, The righteous man that perseveres in his righteousness shall certainly live. *If a man be just*, have a good principle, a good spirit and disposition, and, as an evidence of that, *do judgment and justice* (v. 5), *he shall surely live, saith the Lord God*, v. 9. He that makes conscience of conforming in every thing to the will of God, that makes it his business to serve God and his aim to glorify God, shall without fail be happy here and for ever in the love and favour of God; and, wherein he comes short of his duty, it shall be forgiven him, through a Mediator. Now here is part of the character of this just man.

1. He is careful to keep himself clean from the pollutions of sin, and at a distance from all the appearances of evil.

(1.) From sins against the second commandment. In the matters of God's worship he is jealous, for he knows God is so. He has not only not sacrificed in the high places to the images there set up, but he has not so much as *eaten upon the mountains*, that is, not had any communion with idolaters by *eating things sacrificed to idols*, ~~(40)~~ 1 Corinthians 10:20. He would not only not kneel with them at their altars, but not sit with them at their tables in their high places. He detests not only the idols of the heathen but *the idols of the house of Israel*, which were not only allowed of, but generally applauded and adored, by those that were accounted the professing people of God. He has not only not worshipped those idols, but he has not so much as *lifted up his eyes* to them; he has not given them a favourable look, has had no regard at all to them, neither desired their favour nor dreaded their frowns. He has observed so many bewitched by them that he has not dared so much as to look at them, lest he should be taken in the snare. The eyes of idolaters are said to *go a whoring*, ~~(40)~~ Ezekiel 6:9. See ~~(40)~~ Deuteronomy 4:19.

(2.) From sins against the seventh commandment. He is careful to possess his vessel in *sanctification and honour*, and not *in the lusts of uncleanness*; and therefore he has not dared to *defile his neighbour's wife*, nor said or done any thing which had the least tendency to corrupt or debauch her, no, nor will he make any undue approaches to his own wife when she is *put apart for her uncleanness*, for it was forbidden by the law, ~~(40)~~ Leviticus 18:19; 20:18. Note, It is an essential branch of wisdom and justice to keep the appetites of the body always in subjection to reason and virtue.

(3.) From sins against the eighth commandment. He is a *just man*, who has not, by fraud and under colour of law and right, *oppressed any*, and who has not with force and arms *spoiled any by violence*, not spoiled them of their goods or estates, much less of their liberties and lives, v. 7. Oppression and violence were the sins of the old world, that brought the deluge, and are sins of which still God is and will be the avenger. Nay, he is one that has not lent his money *upon usury*, nor *taken increase* (v. 8), though, being done by contract, it may seem free from injustice (*Volenti non fit injuria* — *What is done to a person with his own consent is no injury to him*), yet, as far as it is forbidden by the law, he dares not do it. A

moderate usury they were allowed to receive from strangers, but not from their brethren. A just man will not take advantage of his neighbour's necessity to make a prey of him, nor indulge himself in ease and idleness to live upon the sweat and toil of others, and therefore will not take increase from those who cannot make increase of what he lends them, nor be rigorous in exacting what was agreed for from those who by the act of God are disabled to pay it; but he is willing to share in loss as well as profit. *Qui sentit commodum, sentire debet et onus* — *He who enjoys the benefit should bear the burden.*

2. He makes conscience of doing the duties of his place. He has *restored the pledge* to the poor debtor, according to the law. ⁽¹²²⁶⁾Exodus 22:26. “*If thou take thy neighbour's raiment for a pledge, the raiment that is for necessary use, thou shalt deliver it to him again, that he may sleep in his own bedclothes.*” Nay, he has not only restored to the poor that which was their own, but has *given his bread to the hungry*. Observe, It is called *his bread*, because it is honestly come by; that which is given to some is not unjustly taken from others; for God has said, *I hate robbery for burnt-offerings*. Worldly men insist upon it that their bread is *their own*, as Nabal, who therefore would not give of it to David (⁽¹²⁵¹⁾1 Samuel 25:11); yet let them know that it is not so their own but that they are bound to do good to others with it. Clothes are necessary as well as food, and therefore this just man is so charitable as *to cover the naked also with a garment*, v. 7. The coats which Dorcas had made for the poor were produced as witnesses of her charity, ⁽⁴⁸⁹⁾Acts 9:39. This just man has *withdrawn his hands from iniquity*, v. 8. If at any time he has been drawn in through inadvertency to that which afterwards has appeared to him to be a wrong thing, he does not persist in it because he has begun it, but *withdraws his hand* from that which he now perceives to be *iniquity*; for he *executes true judgment between man and man*, according as his opportunity is of doing it (as a judge, as a witness, as a juryman, as a referee), and in all commerce is concerned that justice be done, that no man be wronged, that he who is wronged be righted, and that every man have his own, and is ready to interpose himself, and do any good office, in order hereunto. This is his character towards his neighbours; yet it will not suffice that he be just and true to his brother, to complete his character he must be so to his God likewise (v. 9): *He has walked in my statutes*, those which relate to the duties of his immediate worship; *he has kept* those and all his other *judgments*, has had respect to them all, has made it his constant care and

endeavour to conform and come up to them all, to deal truly, that so he may approve himself faithful to his covenant with God, and, having joined himself to God, he does not treacherously *depart from him*, nor *dissemble with him*. This is a just man, and *living he shall live*; he shall certainly live, shall have life and shall have it more abundantly, shall live truly, live comfortably, live eternally. *Keep the commandments*, and thou shalt *enter into life*, ~~407~~Matthew 19:17.

~~380~~EZEKIEL 18:10-20

THE WAYS OF GOD JUSTIFIED

God, by the prophet, having laid down the general rule of judgment, that he will render eternal life to those that *patiently continue in well-doing*, but indignation and wrath to those that do not *obey the truth*, but *obey unrighteousness* (~~408~~Romans 2:7, 8), comes, in these verses, to show that men's parentage and relation shall not alter the case either one way or other.

I. He applied it largely and particularly both ways. As it was in the royal line of the kings of Judah, so it often happens in private families, that godly parents have wicked children and wicked parents have godly children. Now here he shows,

1. That a wicked man shall certainly perish in his iniquity, though he be the son of a pious father. If that righteous man before described *beget a son* whose character is the reverse of his father's, his condition will certainly be so too.

(1.) It is supposed as no uncommon case, but a very melancholy one, that the child of a very godly father, notwithstanding all the instructions given him, the good education he has had and the needful rebukes that have been given him, and the restraints he has been laid under, after all the pains taken with him and prayers put up for him, may yet prove notoriously wicked and vile, the grief of his father, the shame of his family, and the curse and plague of his generation. He is here supposed to allow himself in all those enormities which his good father dreaded and carefully avoided, and to shake off all those good duties which his father made conscience of and took satisfaction in; he undoes all that his father did, and goes counter

to his example in every thing. He is here described to be a highwayman — *a robber and a shedder of blood*. He is an idolater: *He has eaten upon the mountains* (v. 11) and has *lifted up his eyes to the idols*, which his good father never did, and has come at length not only to feast with the idolaters, but to sacrifice with them, which is here called *committing abomination*, for the way of sin is down-hill. He is an adulterer, has *defiled his neighbour's wife*. He is an oppressor even of *the poor and needy*; he robs the spital, and squeezes those who, he knows, cannot defend themselves, and takes a pride and pleasure in trampling upon the weak and impoverishing those that are poor already. He *takes away* from those to whom he should *give*. He has *spoiled by violence* and open force; he has *given forth upon usury*, and so spoiled by contract; and he *has not restored the pledge*, but unjustly detained it even when the debt was paid. Let those good parents that have wicked children not look upon their case as singular; it is a case put here; and by it we see that grace does not run in the blood, nor always attend the means of grace. The race is not always to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, for then the children that are well taught would do well, but God will let us know that his grace is his own and his Spirit a free-agent, and that though we are tied to give our children a good education he is not tied to bless it. In this, as much as any thing, appears the power of original sin and the necessity of special grace.

(2.) We are here assured that this wicked man shall perish for ever in his iniquity, notwithstanding his being the son of a good father. He may perhaps prosper awhile in the world, for the sake of the piety of his ancestors, but, having *committed all these abominations*, and never repented of them, *he shall not live*, he shall not be happy in the favour of God; though he may escape the sword of men, he shall not escape the curse of God. *He shall surely die*; he shall be for ever miserable; *his blood shall be upon him*. He may thank himself; he is his own destroyed. And his relation to a good father will be so far from standing him in stead that it will aggravate his sin and his condemnation. It made his sin the more heinous, nay, it made him really the more vile and profligate, and, consequently, will make his misery hereafter the more intolerable.

2. That a righteous man shall be certainly happy, though he be the son of a wicked father. Though the father did eat the sour grapes, if the children do not meddle with them, they shall fare never the worse for that. Here,

(1.) It is supposed (and, blessed be God, it is sometimes a case in fact) that the son of an ungodly father may be godly, that, observing how fatal his father's errors were, he may be so wise as to *take warning*, and not tread in his father's tests, v. 14. Ordinarily, children partake of the parents' temper and are drawn in to imitate their example; but here the son, instead of *seeing his father's sins*, and, as is usual, doing the like, sees them and dreads doing the like. *Men* indeed do not *gather grapes of thorns*, but God sometimes does, takes a branch from a wild olive and grafts it into a good one. Wicked Ahaz begets a good Hezekiah, who *sees all his father's sins which he has done*, and though he will not, like Ham, proclaim his father's shame, or make the worst of it, yet he loathes it, and blushes at it, and thinks the worse of sin because it was the reproach and ruin of his own father. *He considers and does not such like*; he considers how ill it became his father to do such things, what an offence it was to God and all good men, what a wound and dishonour he got by it, and what calamities he brought into his family, and therefore he *does not such like*. Note, If we did but duly *consider the ways* of wicked men, we should all dread being associates with them and followers of them. The particulars are here again enumerated almost in the same words with that character given of the just man (v. 6, etc.), to show how good men *walk in the same spirit and in the same steps*. This just man here, when he took care to avoid his father's sins, took care to imitate his grandfather's virtues; and, if we look back, we shall find some examples for our imitation, as well as others for our admonition. This just man can not only say, as the Pharisee, *I am no adulterer, no extortioner, no oppressor, no usurer, no idolater*; but he has *given his bread to the hungry and covered the naked*. He has *taken off his hand from the poor*; where he found his father had put hardships upon poor servants, tenants, neighbours, he eased their burden. He did not say, "What my father has done I will abide by, and if it was a fault it was his and not mine;" as Rehoboam, who contemned the taxes his father had imposed. No; he *takes his hand off from the poor*, and restores them to their rights and liberties again, v. 15-17. Thus he has *executed God's judgments and walked in his statutes*, not only done his duty for once, but one on in a course and way of obedience.

(2.) We are assured that the graceless father alone shall die in his iniquity, but his gracious son shall fare never the worse for it. As for his father (v. 18), because he was a cruel oppressor, and *did hurt*, nay, because, though he had wealth and power, he did not with them do good among his people,

lo, *even he*, great as he is, *shall die in his iniquity*, and be undone for ever; but he that kept his integrity *shall surely live*, shall be easy and happy, and he shall *not die for the iniquity of his father*. Perhaps his father's wickedness has lessened his estate and weakened his interest, but it shall be no prejudice at all to his acceptance with God and his eternal welfare.

II. He appeals to themselves then whether they did not wrong God with their proverb. “Thus plain the case is, and *yet you say*, *Does not the son bear the iniquity of the father?* No, he does not; he shall not if he will himself *do that which is lawful and right*,” v. 19. But this people that bore the iniquity of their fathers had not done that which is lawful and right, and therefore justly suffered for their own sin and had no reason to complain of God's proceedings against them as at all unjust, though they had reason to complain of the bad example their fathers had left them as very unkind. *Our fathers have sinned and are not, and we have borne their iniquity*, ^{<21>}Lamentations 5:7. It is true that there is a curse entailed upon wicked families, but it is as true that the entail may be cut off by repentance and reformation; let the impenitent and unreformed therefore thank themselves if they fall under it. The settled rule of judgment is therefore repeated (v. 20): *The soul that sins shall die*, and not another for it. What direction God has given to earthly judges (^{<1216>}Deuteronomy 24:16) he will himself pursue: *The son shall not die*, not die eternally, *for the iniquity of the father*, if he do not tread in the steps of it, nor the father *for the iniquity of the son*, if he endeavour to do his duty for the preventing of it. In *the day of the revelation of the righteous judgment of God*, which is now clouded and eclipsed, *the righteousness of the righteous shall appear before all the world to be upon him*, to his everlasting comfort and honour, upon him as a robe, upon his as a crown; and *the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him*, to his everlasting confusion, upon him as a chain, upon him as a load, as a mountain of lead to sink him to the bottomless pit.

~~<1821>~~ EZEKIEL 18:21-29

GOD'S VINDICATION OF HIMSELF

We have here another rule of judgment which God will go by in dealing with us, by which is further demonstrated the equity of his government.

The former showed that God will reward or punish according to the change made in the family or succession, for the better or for the worse; here he shows that he will reward or punish according to the change made in the person himself, whether for the better or the worse. While we are in this world we are in a state of probation; the time of trial lasts as long as the time of life, and according as we are found at last it will be with us to eternity. Now see here,

I. The case fairly stated, much as it had been before (^{<208>}Ezekiel 3:18, etc.), and here it is laid down once (v. 21-24) and again (v. 26-28), because it is a matter of vast importance, a matter of life and death, of life and death eternal. Here we have,

1. A fair invitation given to wicked people, to turn from their wickedness. Assurance is here given us that, *if the wicked will turn, he shall surely live*, v. 21, 27. Observe,

(1.) What is required to denominate a man a true convert, how he must be qualified that he may be entitled to this act of indemnity.

[1.] The first step towards conversion is consideration (v. 28): *Because he considers and turns*. The reason why sinners go on in their evil ways is because they do not consider what will be *in the end thereof*; but if the prodigal once *come to himself*, if he sit down and consider a little how bad his state is and how easily it may be bettered, he will soon *return to his father* (^{<257>}Luke 15:17), and the adulteress *to her first husband* when she considers that *then it was better with her than now*, ^{<307>}Hosea 2:7.

[2.] This consideration must produce an aversion to sin. When he considers he must turn *away from his wickedness*, which denotes a change in the disposition of the heart; he must turn from *his sins and his transgression*, which denotes a change in the life; he must break off from all his evil courses, and, wherein he has done iniquity, must resolve to do so no more, and this from a principle of hatred to sin. *What have I to do any more with idols?*

[3.] This aversion to sin must be universal; he must turn from *all* his sins and *all* his transgressions, without a reserve for any Delilah, any house of Rimmon. We do not rightly turn from sin unless we truly hate it, and we do not truly hate sin, as sin, if we do not hate all sin.

[4.] This must be accompanied with a conversion to God and duty; he must *keep all God's statutes* (for the obedience, if it be sincere, will be universal) and must *do that which is lawful and right*, that which agrees with the word and will of God, which he must take for his rule, and not the will of the flesh and the way of the world.

(2.) What is promised to those that do thus turn from sin to God.

[1.] They shall *save their souls alive*, v. 27. They shall *surely live, they shall not die*, v. 21. and again v. 28. Whereas it was said, *The soul that sins it shall die*, yet let not those that have sinned despair but that the threatened death may be prevented if they will but turn and repent in time. When David penitently acknowledges, *I have sinned*, he is immediately assured of his pardon: "*The Lord has taken away thy sin, thou shalt not die* (~~102~~ 2 Samuel 12:13), thou shalt not die eternally." He shall *surely live*; he shall be restored to the favour of God, which is the life of the soul, and shall not lie under *his wrath*, which is as *messengers of death* to the soul.

[2.] The sins they have repented of and forsaken shall not rise up in judgment against them, nor shall they be so much as upbraided with them: *All his transgressions that he has committed*, though numerous, though heinous, though very provoking to God, and redounding very much to his dishonour, yet *they shall not be mentioned unto him* (v. 22), not mentioned against them; not only they shall not be imputed to him to ruin him, but in the great day they shall not be remembered against him to grieve or shame him; they shall be covered, shall be sought for and not found. This intimates the fulness of pardoning mercy; when sin is forgiven it is *blotted out*, it is *remembered no more*.

[3.] In *their righteousness they shall live*; not for their righteousness, as if that were the purchase of their pardon and bliss and an atonement for their sins, but in their righteousness, which qualifies them for all the blessings purchased by the Mediator, and is itself one of those blessings.

(3.) What encouragement a repenting returning sinner has to hope for pardon and life according to this promise. He is conscious to himself that his obedience for the future can never be a valuable compensation for his former disobedience; but he has this to support himself with, that God's nature, property, and delight, is to have mercy and to forgive, for he has said (v. 23): "*Have I any pleasure at all that the wicked should die?* No, by no means; you never had any cause given you to think so." It is true

God has determined to punish sinners; his justice calls for their punishment, and, pursuant to that, impenitent sinners will lie for ever under his wrath and curse; that is the will of his decree, his consequent will, but it is not his antecedent will, the will of his delight. Though the righteousness of his government requires that sinners die, yet the goodness of his nature objects against it. *How shall I give thee up, Ephraim?* It is spoken here comparatively; he has not pleasure in the ruin of sinners, for he would rather they should *turn from their ways and live*; he is better pleased when his mercy is glorified in their salvation than when his justice is glorified in their damnation.

2. A fair warning given to righteous people not to turn from their righteousness, v. 24-26. Here is,

(1.) The character of an apostate, that *turns away from his righteousness*. He never was in sincerity a righteous man (as appears by that of the apostle, [Ⓢ]1 John 2:19, *If they had been of us, they would, no doubt, have continued with us*), but he passed for a righteous man. He had the denomination and all the external marks of a righteous man; he thought himself one, and others thought him one. But he throws of his profession, leaves his first love, disowns and forsakes the truth and ways of God, and so *turns away from his righteousness* as one sick of it, and now shows, what he always had, a secret aversion to it; and, having *turned away from his righteousness*, he *commits iniquity*, grows loose, and profane, and sensual, intemperate, unjust, and, in short, *does according to all the abominations that the wicked man does*; for, when the unclean spirit recovers his possession of the heart, he *brings with him seven other spirits more wicked than himself and they enter in and dwell there*, [Ⓢ]Luke 11:26.

(2.) The doom of an apostate: *Shall he live* because he was once a *righteous man*? No; *factum non dicitur quod non perseverat* — *that which does not abide is not said to be done*. *In his trespass* (v. 24) and for his iniquity (that is the meritorious cause of his ruin), *for the iniquity that he has done, he shall die*, shall die eternally, v. 26. *The backslider in heart shall be filled with his own ways*. But will not his former professions and performances stand him in some stead — will they not avail at least to mitigate his punishment? No: *All his righteousness that he has done*, though ever so much applauded by men, *shall not be mentioned* so as to be either a credit or a comfort to him; the righteousness of an apostate is

forgotten, as the wickedness of a penitent is. Under the law, if a Nazarite was polluted he lost all the foregoing days of his separation (^{<OFF>}Numbers 6:12), so those that have *begun in the spirit and end in the flesh* may reckon all their past services and sufferings *in vain* (^{<ARB>}Galatians 3:3, 4); unless we persevere we *lose what we have gained*, ^{<GRB>}2 John 1:8.

II. An appeal to the consciences even of the house of Israel, though very corrupt, concerning God's equity in all these proceedings; for he will be justified, as well as sinners judged, out of their own mouths.

1. The charge they drew up against God is blasphemous, v. 25, 29. The *house of Israel* has the impudence to say, *The way of the Lord is not equal*, than which nothing could be more absurd as well as impious. *He that formed the eye, shall he not see? Can his ways be unequal whose will is the eternal rule of good and evil, right and wrong? Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?* No doubt he shall; he cannot do otherwise.

2. God's reasonings with them are very gracious and condescending, for even these blasphemers God would rather have convinced and saved than condemned. One would have expected that God would immediately vindicate the honour of his justice by making those that impeached it eternal monuments of it. Must those be suffered to draw another breath that have once breathed out such wickedness as this? Shall that tongue ever speak again any where but in hell that has once said, *The ways of the Lord are not equal?* Yes, because this is the day of God's patience, he vouchsafes to argue with them; and he requires them to own, for it is so plain that they cannot deny,

(1.) The equity of his ways: *Are not my ways equal?* No doubt they are. He never lays upon man more than is right. In the present punishments of sinners and the afflictions of his own people, yea, and in the eternal damnation of the impenitent, *the ways of the Lord are equal.*

(2.) The iniquity of their ways: "*Are not your ways unequal?* It is plain that they are, and the troubles you are in you have brought upon your own heads. God does you no wrong, but you have wronged yourselves." *The foolishness of man perverts his way*, makes that unequal, and then *his heart frets against the Lord*, as if his ways were unequal, ^{<ARB>}Proverbs 19:3. In all our disputes with God, and in all his controversies with us, it will be found that his ways are equal, but ours are unequal, that he is in the right and we are in the wrong.

☞ EZEKIEL 18:30-32

ENCOURAGEMENT TO REPENTANCE

We have here the conclusion and application of this whole matter. After a fair trial at the bar of right reason the verdict is brought in on God's side; it appears that *his ways are equal*. Judgment therefore is next to be given; and one would think it should be a judgment of condemnation, nothing short of *Go, you cursed, into everlasting fire*. But, behold, a miracle of mercy; the day of grace and divine patience is yet lengthened out; and therefore, though God will at last judge *every one according to his ways*, yet he waits to be gracious, and closes all with a call to repentance and a promise of pardon upon repentance.

I. Here are four necessary duties that we are called to, all amounting to the same: —

- 1.** We must repent; we must change our mind and change our ways; we must be sorry for what we have done amiss and ashamed of it, and go as far as we can towards the undoing of it again.
- 2.** We must *turn ourselves from all our transgressions*, v. 30 and again v. 32. *Turn yourselves, face about; turn from sin, nay, turn against it as the enemy you loathe, turn to God as the friend you love.*
- 3.** We must *cast away from us all our transgressions*; we must abandon and forsake them with a resolution never to return to them again, give sin a bill of divorce, break all the leagues we have made with it, throw it overboard, as the mariners did Jonah (for it has raised the storm), cast it out of the soul, and crucify it as a malefactor.
- 4.** We must *make us a new heart and a new spirit*. This was the matter of a promise, ☞ Ezekiel 11:19. Here it is the matter of a precept. We must do our endeavour, and then God will not be wanting to us to give us his grace. St. Austin well explains this precept. *Deus non jubet impossibilia, sed jubendo monet et facere quod possis et petere quod non possis* — *God does not enjoin impossibilities, but by his commands admonishes us to do what is in our power and to pray for what is not.*

II. Here are four good arguments used to enforce these calls to repentance: —

- 1.** It is the only way, and it is a sure way, to prevent the ruin which our sins have a direct tendency to: *So iniquity shall not be your ruin*, which implies that, if we do not repent, iniquity will be our ruin, here and for ever, but that, if we do, we are safe, we are snatched as brands out of the burning.
- 2.** If we repent not, we certainly perish, and our blood will be upon our own heads. *Why will you die, O house of Israel?* What an absurd thing it is for you to choose death and damnation rather than life and salvation. Note, The reason why sinners die is because they *will die*; they will go down the way that leads to death, and not come up to the terms on which life is offered. Herein sinners, especially sinners of the house of Israel, are most unreasonable and act most unaccountably.
- 3.** The God of heaven has no delight in our ruin, but desires our welfare (v. 32): *I have no pleasure in the death of him that dies*, which implies that he has pleasure in the recovery of those that repent; and this is both an engagement and an encouragement to us to repent.
- 4.** We are made for ever if we repent: *Turn yourselves, and live*. He that says to us, *Repent*, thereby says to us, *Live*, yea, he says to us, *Live*; so that life and death are here set before us.