

## The Iniquities of Our Forefathers – Part 1

### *The Nature of Inherited Character Weaknesses<sup>1</sup>*

When Mandy met Ken, he exclaimed, “You must be a member of the Johnson family!” “Yes, I am,” replied Ken. “How did you know?” “It is quite obvious,” said Mandy. “You look just like your father!” Also, when Shanah was thirty-five years old, she began to feel pains around her heart and up and down her left arm. When she went to the doctor, he asked her about her family’s medical history. She then explained that both her mother and grandmother died of heart failure before the age of forty-five. Steve was a likable person, and people enjoyed his company—except when he became violently angry. The unpredictable outbursts happened mostly at work. His employees lived in constant dread that something would “set him off.” During a counseling session, he explained that for no apparent reason he would encounter overpowering emotions of anger. He also stated that his father and grandfather experienced the same problem.

It is quite obvious that the physical features of parents are passed on to their children through the dominant and recessive factors in their genes. Ample scientific data also indicates that the tendencies for various diseases are passed on from parents to children. But what about the character flaws and weaknesses of parents? Do they directly affect the emotions or actions of their sons and daughters? This question must be answered by anyone who is committed to getting lasting solutions to the complex personal, marriage and family problems of our day.

### **The Iniquities of Our Forefathers**

Within the Ten Commandments, G-d strategically posted a warning notice for all to read and hear: “*I, ADONAI your G-d, am a jealous G-d, punishing the children for the sins of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but displaying grace to the thousandth generation of those who love me and obey my mitzvot.*” (Exodus 20:5-6, CJB). “*You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the L-RD your G-d, am a jealous G-d, visiting the iniquity (avón, ἰσγ) of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.*” (Exodus 20:5-6, NASB)

To make sure that this message is not overlooked, G-d repeats it three more times. (See Exodus 34:7, Numbers 14:18, and Deuteronomy 5:9-10.) *Moshe* (Moses), *Yirmeyahu* (Jeremiah), *Daniel*, *Nechemyah* (Nehemiah) and others realized the seriousness of this warning. They understood that G-d wanted them to agree with Him about the iniquities of their parents and purpose to not continue them. Therefore, they took the initiative to acknowledge the iniquities of their fathers when they confessed their own sins. (Later in the teaching we will consider Numbers 14:17-20, Jeremiah 14:20, Daniel 9:16, and Nehemiah 9:2.)

### **The “Sour Grapes” Theory**

Some people have chosen to believe that the character faults of parents have no direct influence on their children. They point to the passages in Jeremiah and Ezekiel that explain that the children should not suffer for the sins of their parents, nor the parents for the sins of their children: “*When those days come they will no longer say, ‘The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.’ Rather, each will die for his own sin; every one who eats sour grapes, his own teeth will be set on edge.*” (CJB). “*In those days they will not say again, ‘The fathers have eaten sour grapes, And the children’s teeth are set on edge.’ But everyone will die for his own iniquity; each man who eats the sour grapes, his teeth will be set on edge.*” (Jeremiah 31:29-30, NASB). An attempt to use this passage to nullify the message of the previous passages is futile, because in the next chapter G-d restates the original notice: “*You display your grace to thousands but also repay the guilt of the fathers into the lap of their children who follow them. Great, powerful G-d, whose name is ADONAI-Tzva’ot, great in counsel, mighty in deed! Your eyes are open to all the ways of human beings in order to repay each one according to his ways, according to the consequences of what he*

does.” (CJB). *“Who shows lovingkindness to thousands, but repays the iniquity of fathers into the bosom of their children after them, O great and mighty G-d. The L-RD of hosts is His name; great in counsel and mighty in deed, whose eyes are open to all the ways of the sons of men, giving to everyone according to his ways and according to the fruit of his deeds.”* (Jeremiah 32:18-19, NASB). This passage reaffirms the basic message of all the mentioned Scripture: a person is responsible for his own sins. A son cannot blame his father for his sin, nor can a father blame his son. G-d will reward each person on the merits of his own actions.

Another passage in Ezekiel 18:2-3 reveals additional insight on this matter: *“What does it mean, that you keep quoting this proverb in the land of Isra’el - ‘When parents eat sour grapes, their children’s teeth are set on edge’? ‘As I live,’ says Adonai Elohim, ‘I swear that you will never again quote this proverb in Isra’el.’”* (CJB). *“What do you mean by using this proverb concerning the land of Israel, saying, ‘The fathers eat the sour grapes, But the children’s teeth are set on edge?’ ‘As I live, declares the L-RD G-D, you are surely not going to use this proverb in Israel anymore.’”* (NASB)

As noted by John Calvin, the people in the days of Ezekiel and Jeremiah were misusing this proverb by blaming their forefathers for their sins. His paraphrase of the passage is as follows: *“I will soon deprive you of this boasting of yours; for your iniquity shall be made manifest, so that all the world may see that you are but enduring just punishment, which you yourselves have deserved, and that you cannot cast it upon your fathers, as you have hitherto attempted to do.”*

The entire contexts of the “sour grapes” passages confirm that G-d is not lifting the original notice of visiting iniquities upon future generations, but rather, He is clarifying it. Even though iniquities of the father may influence the children, each person will die for his own sins. *“So he will not die for his father’s sins but will certainly live”* (CJB). *“...he will not die for his father’s iniquity, he will surely live.”* (Ezekiel 18:17, NASB). Verse 19 asks, *“‘You ask, ‘Why doesn’t the son bear his father’s guilt?’ When the son has done what is lawful and right, has kept all my laws and obeyed them, he will certainly live”* (CJB). *“Yet you say, ‘Why should the son not bear the punishment for the father’s iniquity?’ When the son has practiced justice and righteousness and has observed all My statutes and done them, he shall surely live”* (NASB). G-d then makes a distinction between bearing iniquity and visiting iniquity.

*“‘You ask, ‘Why doesn’t the son bear his father’s guilt?’ When the son has done what is lawful and right, has kept all my laws and obeyed them, he will certainly live. The person who sins is the one that will die - a son is not to bear his father’s guilt with him, nor is the father to bear his son’s guilt with him; but the righteousness of the righteous will be his own, and the wickedness of the wicked will be his own.”* (CJB). *“‘As for his father, because he practiced extortion, robbed his brother and did what was not good among his people, behold, he will die for his iniquity. ‘Yet you say, ‘Why should the son not bear the punishment for the father’s iniquity?’ When the son has practiced justice and righteousness and has observed all My statutes and done them, he shall surely live. ‘The person who sins will die. The son will not bear the punishment for the father’s iniquity, nor will the father bear the punishment for the son’s iniquity; the righteousness of the righteous will be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked will be upon himself.’”* (NASB) (Ezekiel 18:19-20).

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<sup>i</sup> Adapted from *A supplement to the Course in Effective Counseling*, Institute of Basic Life Principles, 1999