

The Iniquities of Our Forefathers: The Nature of Inherited Character Weaknesses¹

The Difference Between “Visiting” and “Bearing” Iniquities

It is important to note the precise meanings of the two words that G-d uses to explain the concept of the iniquities of the forefathers. The word visiting is the Hebrew root *pakad* (פקד). It means “to superintend, to watch over, to oversee.” Just prior to the verse on sour grapes G-d explains how He superintends the iniquities of the fathers. “*At that time, just as I used to watch over them with the intent to uproot, break down, overthrow, destroy and do harm; so then I will watch over them to build and plant,*” says ADONAI.” Jeremiah 31:28).

Several commentaries emphasize the point that visiting iniquities is neither a final punishment nor an irreversible state. Even though children are born under the disadvantage of the influence of their parents’ iniquities, they will be shown mercy by a gracious G-d if they acknowledge and appropriate G-d’s grace to turn from the iniquities of their forefathers. G-d’s superintendence, therefore, directly relates to the responses of the sons and daughters to the iniquities of their forefathers. If they continue in the iniquities, they will be judged. However, if they acknowledge iniquities as wicked and turn from them, they will live. This precise explanation is given in Ezekiel after the verses on sour grapes. “*Look, all lives belong to me - both the parent's life and the child's life are equally mine - so it is the person who sins, himself, who must die*” (CJB). “*Behold, all souls are Mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is Mine. The soul who sins will die*” (NASB) (Ezekiel 18:4).

The word bear in the Ezekiel 18:20 passage is the Hebrew word *nasá* (נשא) which literally means “to lift.” It denotes the bearing of a yoke or burden. G-d specifically says that children will not bear the iniquities of their forefathers in the sense of being yoked to them so that they have no ability to do what is right. The application of *nasá* in this context would explain the misuse of their proverb. The knowledge that the fathers’ sins are against the L-RD and that they will put their children at a disadvantage should be a strong deterrent to restrain parents in their evil courses of action. G-d compensates His ‘visiting iniquity’ with rich mercy that goes beyond just four generations benefiting thousands upon thousands of them that love Him and keep His *mitzvot* (commandments.)

What Is the Precise Definition of Iniquity?

In 2 Thessalonians 2:7 we learn that iniquity is a mystery “*For the mystery of lawlessness (NASB) (or iniquity, KJV) (or separating from Torah, CJB) is already at work; only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way.*” A mystery is something that is hidden from the full understanding of man. However, other Scripture passages that are related to iniquities can help us begin to comprehend its meaning.

The Greek word for iniquity (lawlessness) is *anomia* (as in: *antinomianism*). It means not being subject to G-d’s *Torah* (Law.) Based on the teaching of *Yeshua* and other passages, iniquity is self-will, that is, “*doing our own will, even if it appears to be good.*”

Yeshua explains such a definition in His Sermon on the Mount. “*Not everyone who says to me, ‘L-RD, L-RD!’ will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, only those who do what my Father in heaven wants. On that Day, many will say to me, ‘L-RD, L-RD! Didn't we prophesy in your name? Didn't we expel demons in your name? Didn't we perform many miracles in your name?’ Then I will tell them to their faces, ‘I never knew you! Get away from me, you workers of lawlessness!’ (iniquity, KJV)*” (Matthew 7:21-23).

This definition is further confirmed in Isaiah 53:5-6: “*But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, And by His scourging we are healed. All of us like sheep have gone astray, Each of us has turned to his own way; But the L-RD has caused the iniquity of us all To fall on Him.*” By walking in G-d’s ways we “*do no iniquity*” (*avlah*, Psalm 119:3). David’s prayer was “*And do not let any iniquity have dominion over me.*” (*kol-avon*, Psalm 119:133).

Although the concept of iniquity and the act of sin can be seen as synonyms (as in the CJB), Scripture makes a distinction between them: “*Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity (meavoni) and cleanse me from my sin (chatá)*” (Ps 51:2). “*Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity (B^eAvón), and in sin (UB^echet) my mother conceived me.*” (Ps 51:5).

James describes the sequence of antinomianism leading to sin: “*Rather, each person is being tempted whenever he is being dragged off and enticed by the bait of his own desire. Then, having conceived, the desire gives birth to sin; and when sin is fully grown, it gives birth to death*” (James 1:14-15, CJB). “*But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death*” (James 1:14-15, NASB). If iniquity is the covert act of willfulness and sin is the overt act of transgression, then this teaching of *Yeshua* would be very insightful on the matter of iniquity. “*You have heard that our fathers were told, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ And I tell you that a man who even looks at a woman with the purpose of lusting after her has already committed adultery with her in his heart*” (Matthew 5:27-28). Based on this Scripture, David’s lusting after Bathsheba when he saw her on the rooftop was his iniquity, and his actions of committing adultery and arranging for the death of her husband was his sin.

Scripture specifically identifies the following as iniquities: bitterness (“*For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity.*” Acts 8:23, NASB), greed (“*For the love of money is a root of all the evils; because of this craving, some people have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves to the heart with many pains.*” (1 Timothy 6:10), lust (“¹*I have made a covenant with my eyes; How then could I gaze at a virgin?...³Is it not calamity to the unjust And disaster to those who work iniquity? ...⁶And let G-d know my integrity. ...¹¹For that would be a lustful crime; Moreover, it would be an iniquity punishable by judges.*” Job 31:1-11; “*Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity (meavoni) And cleanse me from my sin.(chatá)*” Psalm 51:2; “*(I am using popular language because your human nature is so weak.) For just as you used to offer your various parts as slaves to impurity and lawlessness, which led to more lawlessness (iniquity unto iniquity, KJV); so now offer your various parts as slaves to righteousness, which leads to being made holy, set apart for G-d.*” Romans 6:19), and stubbornness (“*For rebellion is as the sin of divination (witchcraft), And insubordination is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the L-RD, He has also rejected you from being king.*” 1 Samuel 15:23). Notice that all of them are inward attitudes of the heart.

In describing the mystery of iniquity, Paul explains that those who reject the truth receive strong delusion from the L-rd, causing them to believe a lie. He also explains that during this present age the full force of iniquity is being restrained by the Holy Spirit until the coming day, when there will be total insubordination to G-d and complete lawlessness (antinomianism). (“⁷*For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way. ⁸Then that lawless one will be revealed whom the L-RD will slay with the breath of His mouth and bring to an end by the appearance of His coming; ⁹that is, the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders, ¹⁰and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved. ¹¹For this reason G-d will send upon them a deluding influence so that they will believe what is false, ¹²in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness.*” 2 Thessalonians 2:7-12.)

How Do We Know Specific Iniquities Are Passed On?

We can gain wisdom in the ways of G-d by studying the testimonies of people that He placed in the Scriptures. “*The testimony of the L-RD is sure, making wise the simple*” (Psalm 19:7, KJV). We can discover in these biographies how the iniquities of the fathers are passed on to future generations. Here are a few examples.

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob: Abraham and Sarah: “*Sarah is my sister*” which was a partial lie. Then Isaac and Rebekah: “*Rebekah is my sister*” which was a full lie. Then finally Jacob to Isaac “*I am Esau*” which was a full lie and a conspiracy to deceive. Jacob’s iniquity was passed on to his children, and their deception about Joseph’s disappearance greatly grieved Isaac. Joseph’s brothers took his coat, dipped it in blood, brought it to their father, and said, “*They took Yosef’s robe, killed a male goat and dipped the robe in the blood. Then they sent the long-sleeved robe and brought it to their father, saying, ‘We found this. Do you know if it’s your son’s robe or not?’*”

(Genesis 37:31-32). Then, because of famine, Abraham went to Egypt, where he gained riches through his deceitfulness; Isaac went to Gerar; and Jacob and his family went back to Egypt. Jacob's descendants became Pharaoh's slaves for hundreds of years, in part because of their forefather's deceitfulness. When they cried out because of their bondage, G-d heard their cry (they literally cried with a loud voice unto the L-rd) and delivered them.

Sarah & Hagar: The New Testament does confirm that Sarah followed her own willfulness (her flesh) and not the Spirit of G-d concerning the birth of Ishmael (See Galatians 4:22-31.). Scripture then tells us that Hagar despised Sarah in her heart (see Gen. 16:4-5). The iniquity of Sarah was unbelief. Later when she was told by the L-rd that she would have a child, she laughed—and then lied about her laughing. G-d publicized her iniquity by naming her son *Yitz'chak*, which means “laughter” and in some contexts “mockery.” Hagar's iniquity was despising Sarah in her heart. This iniquity was passed on to her son Ishmael who then openly mocked Sarah's son, Isaac (see Gen. 21:9-10). Today we have the longest going family feud between the descendants of Jacob (the son of Isaac) and the sons of Ishmael (the Israeli-Arab Conflict).

David and His Sons: G-d describes David as “*a man after mine own heart*” (Acts 13:22). Yet G-d did not delete from Scripture the account of his tragic iniquity and sin with Bathsheba and Uriah. When David saw Bathsheba bathing on the rooftop, he lusted after her in his heart and then committed adultery with her. To cover up his sin and account for the child that was to be born, he arranged the death of Uriah. David's iniquity would, no doubt, be passed on to his children and directly affect their behavior: “*So why have you shown such contempt for the word of ADONAI and done what I see as evil? You murdered Uriyah the Hitti with the sword and taken his wife as your own wife; you put him to death with the sword of the people of Amon. Now therefore, the sword will never leave your house - because you have shown contempt for me and taken the wife of Uriyah the Hitti as your own wife*” (2 Samuel 12:9-10).

Why Must We Acknowledge the Iniquities of Our Forefathers?

Children have a natural tendency to imitate their parents. The very word son means “*in the likeness of his father.*” When fathers do what is wrong, it is natural for the children to justify the same action. Yet G-d is a Holy G-d, and He requires obedience to His laws that supersedes even family loyalties. Under the *Torah*, any family member who secretly tried to entice the father to worship a false god was to be stoned without pity. (See Deuteronomy 13:6-9.) How much more should children acknowledge and reject the iniquity of a father who turns from the *Torah* of the L-RD? “*If they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their forefathers, in their unfaithfulness which they committed against Me, and also in their acting with hostility against Me --I also was acting with hostility against them, to bring them into the land of their enemies -- or if their uncircumcised heart becomes humbled so that they then make amends for their iniquity, then I will remember My covenant with Jacob, and I will remember also My covenant with Isaac, and My covenant with Abraham as well, and I will remember the land.*” (Leviticus 26:40-42).

Although G-d visits the iniquities of fathers to the third and fourth generations of children, He shows mercy to all who repent (“*...the thousandth generation of those who love me and obey my mitzvot*”). A hatred for sin is evidence of sincere repentance, whether it be our own sin or that of our forefathers. In fact, one important aspect of repentance is agreeing with G-d about the sinfulness of sin!

Are there Biblical Examples of People Who Acknowledged the Iniquities of their Forefathers?

Yes, of course! Scripture gives us several distinct examples of individuals who acknowledged the iniquities of their forefathers along with the confession of their own sins. These individuals were aware of G-d's instructions concerning iniquity, and they chose to obey them.

Jeremiah: When he realized that G-d's hand of judgment was upon the land of Judah and that Israel's efforts to bring peace and prosperity were fruitless, he was brought to the place of acknowledging the iniquities of the forefathers: “*We know our wickedness, O L-RD, the iniquity of our fathers, for we have sinned against You.*” (Jer. 14:20)

Daniel: When Daniel discerned through the Scriptures that it was time for Israel to be restored to the land, he sought the L-RD through prayer, fasting, and supplication, seeking G-d's forgiveness. Daniel's prayer includes the following: "*O L-RD, in accordance with all Your righteous acts, let now Your anger and Your wrath turn away from Your city Jerusalem, Your holy mountain; for because of our sins and the iniquities of our fathers, Jerusalem and Your people have become a reproach to all those around us.*" (Daniel 9:16).

Nehemiah was committed to restoring the walls around Jerusalem and removing the reproach of Israel. In the days of Nehemiah, Ezra the priest gathered the people together and read to them the *Torah* of the L-RD. When the people realized how far they had strayed from His commandments, they repented in sackcloth and ashes. Their restoration also included the acknowledgement of their forefathers' iniquities: "*The children of Israel separated themselves from all foreigners, and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers*" (Neh. 9:2).

Moses: Moses led the nation of Israel out of Egypt, through the wilderness, and to the border of the Promised Land. Upon reaching the border, Moses sent twelve men to spy out the land. Ten of the spies returned bringing an evil report, which caused the people to refuse to obey the L-RD's command to occupy the land. In response to their disobedience, Moses acknowledged the iniquities of their forefathers, which were influencing their stubbornness and rebellion. "*But now, I pray, let the power of the L-RD be great, just as You have declared, 'The L-RD is slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, forgiving iniquity and transgression; but He will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generations.' Pardon, I pray, the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of Your lovingkindness, just as You also have forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now.*" So the L-RD said, "*I have pardoned them according to your word*" (Numbers 14:17-20).

Is There B'rit Chadasha (New Testament) Instruction Requiring Confessing Iniquities?

One of the best-known passages in the New Testament on confessing sin has a direct relationship to the matter of iniquities. In the John Fisher's Messianic Sidur the following prayer is included: "*He being merciful...If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*" (Psalm 78:38 & John 1:9). The verse indicates that we are responsible to confess our specific sins, and based on this act of obedience, G-d will forgive us our sins and also cleanse us from all unrighteousness. The word unrighteousness in this verse, is the Greek word *adikia*. This same word is translated iniquity in 2 Timothy 2:19 in the authorized version: "*Everyone who names the name of the L-rd is to abstain from wickedness (iniquity).*" The same word is used by *Yeshua* to describe iniquity: "*...Get away from me, all you workers of wickedness! (iniquity)*" (See Luke 13:27.)

Did Yeshua Affirm the Need to Acknowledge the Iniquities of Forefathers?

During *Yeshua's* earthly ministry, He pronounced many woes upon the Pharisees and lawyers of the day because they religiously kept the details of the Oral Law but neglected the weightier matters of the *Torah*. The most serious woe involved the iniquities of their fathers in killing the prophets. "*Woe to you! You build tombs in memory of the prophets, but your fathers murdered them! Thus you testify that you completely approve of what your fathers did - they did the killing, you do the building!*" (Luke 11:47-48).

This passage gives no indication that the Pharisees confessed their own sins and acknowledged the iniquities of their fathers. Therefore, Jesus brought upon them the full weight of their fathers' iniquities and sins. "*From the blood of Hevel to the blood of Z'kharyah, who was killed between the altar and the Holy Place. Yes, I tell you, the responsibility for it will fall on this generation!*" (Luke 11:51).

Also in the final message of his life, Stephen appealed to the council to repent and turn to the L-RD. When he saw that they refused to listen to him, he related their iniquities to the iniquities of their fathers: "*Stiffnecked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You continually oppose the Ruach HaKodesh! You do the same things your forefathers did!*" (Acts 7:51).

Scripture affirms that parental actions today directly affect future behavior of their children

The most obvious example of the ability of the fathers' iniquity to affect future generations is seen in the transgression of Adam. *"Here is how it works: it was through one individual that sin entered the world, and through sin, death; and in this way death passed through to the whole human race, inasmuch as everyone sinned."* (Romans 5:12). Romans 7 vividly describes the laws of sin that continue to be in conflict with the desires of our minds. *"I don't understand my own behavior - I don't do what I want to do; instead, I do the very thing I hate!"* (Romans 7:15).

On the other hand, Scripture provides a powerful example of how the good deeds of forefathers also affect future generations. In Hebrews 7, we are told that Levi paid tithes to Melchisedec, yet Levi was not yet born when these tithes were paid. They were actually paid by his great-grandfather Abraham 135 years earlier! Scripture explains that Levi paid the tithes because he was in the loins of Abraham when he paid them, and thus, he was a physical part of the action. *"One might go even further and say that Levi, who himself receives tenths, paid a tenth through Avraham; inasmuch as he was still in his ancestor Avraham's body when Malki-Tzedek met him."* (Heb. 7:9-10). This profound truth is also at the heart of the matter of acknowledging the iniquities of the forefathers. We were, in reality, a part of them when they committed the iniquities, and therefore we bear the responsibility to agree with G-d and His Word and acknowledge that they were wrong.

Summary: Why Should We Acknowledge Forefathers' iniquities?

- Scripture tells us to do it
- To remove the potential for children to justify sin because their parents did it
- To overcome the tendency to imitate parents
- To demonstrate genuine repentance, which begins by agreeing with G-d that sin is sin
- To obey the Biblical command to acknowledge iniquities (Leviticus 26:39-42)
- To develop a resistance against specific iniquities
- To acknowledge our part in the iniquities of our forefathers
- To appropriate *Yeshua's* forgiveness and cleansing (1 John 1:9)

Should Parents Tell Children Specific Details of Sins?

It is neither appropriate nor necessary for parents to tell explicit details of sins, and such explanation is not required for the acknowledging of iniquities. Iniquities are attitudes of the heart that produce sins such as bitterness, greed, lust, and stubbornness. These iniquities proceed from the heart and defile a person. (Mark 7:20-23.)

Suggested Prayer - How Should the Iniquity of Forefathers Be Acknowledged?

Scripture provides model prayers for acknowledging the iniquities of forefathers, and they would be equally effective for us to use. Here are a few of them:

"We know our wickedness, O L-RD, the iniquity of our fathers, for we have sinned against You." in the matter of _____ (Jeremiah 14:20). *"Pardon, I pray, the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of Your lovingkindness, just as You also have forgiven our people, from Egypt even until now."* for we have _____ (Numbers 14:19). *"For because of our sins and the iniquities of our fathers, Jerusalem and Your people have become a reproach to all those around us, let now Your anger and Your wrath turn away from Your city Jerusalem, Your holy mountain"* and our family because of _____ (Daniel 9:16).

If we inherit character weaknesses or tendencies to do wrong from our forefathers, we cannot blame them for our sins because G-d has given us greater ability and grace to overcome them, for *"...but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more"* (Romans 5:20)

¹ Adapted from *A supplement to the Course in Effective Counseling*, Institute of Basic Life Principles, 1999