

PROCLAMATION MINISTRIES

# GENERATIONAL CURSE

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A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

**By**

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### INTRODUCTION

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Recently, I was asked by a sincere inquirer what I thought of “generational curse” and how it should be understood by New Covenant believers. This appears to be a matter of deep concern to many Christians, prompting them to go to preachers who promote themselves as specialists in “breaking” the “generational curse” and freeing the people from its stronghold. Most people who are concerned about this issue usually cite certain passages from the Old Testament that seem to suggest that God will punish the children to the third and fourth generation for the iniquity of the fathers (Ex. 20:5; 34:7; Num. 14:18; and Deut. 5:9).

The purpose of this short paper is to present a biblical perspective on the so-called “generational curse” and its relevance to New Covenant believers. What I share in this paper is my personal view based on my interpretation of the commonly cited texts. I do so with the hope that it will help the reader to gain some clarity on this subject.

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### THE NEW TESTAMENT PERSPECTIVE

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In a nutshell, the concept of “generational curse” does not apply to a Christian who has received the saving grace of Jesus Christ. The Bible says, “Therefore, if anyone *is* in Christ, *he is* a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new” (2 Cor. 5:17). A person in Christ has been set free from the “law of sin and death” and is placed under the law of the “Spirit of life” (Rom. 8:1–2). The curse of sin no longer hangs on a person who is hidden in Christ because “Jesus Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us” (Gal. 3:13). Generational curse, as commonly understood from some Old Testament passages, is not supported by the New Testament, nor is it in conformity to the criterion of divine justice (Matt. 12:36; Rom. 14:12; 2 Cor. 5:10; Heb. 4:13; 1 Pet. 4:5). Therefore, applying such Old Testament passages to New Covenant believers is to disregard the historical, theological, and covenantal scope of the Old Testament, and the fact that the Old Covenant has been made “obsolete” by the New Covenant (Heb. 8:13).

What is true, however, is that humanity has become depraved due to Adam’s sin, and each person is held accountable to God for his or her own deeds (Matt. 12:36; Rom. 14:12; 2 Cor. 5:10; Heb. 4:13; 1 Pet. 4:5). Because of Adam, all are reckoned sinners deserving death and condemnation (Rom. 5:12). In 1 Corinthians 15:22, Paul gets even more precise and forceful. He says, “For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive.” This verse clinches the whole matter. We are dead in Adam. If we are dead in Adam, we are also sinners in Adam, for the wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23). Paul concludes: “For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man’s obedience many will be made righteous” (Rom. 5:19).

In our state of moral depravity, our natural inclination is not to seek after God, but to turn away from Him and pursue our evil desires (Rom. 3:11–12). We regard sin and its works as more desirable than the things of God. This evil disposition is further exacerbated or inflamed when we are in close proximity to evil influences, such as a family with a history of addictive and destructive behaviors. The remedy for the enslavement of the human spirit by sin is to repent, receive the new life in Christ, and be clothed with His righteousness (2 Cor. 5:17, 21; Rom. 5:17; Col. 3:3). The Bible says, “Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed” (John 8:36). No generational curse! No condemnation! No retribution!

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#### THE OLD TESTAMENT PERSPECTIVE

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The Old Testament is the story of God electing Abraham and his offspring to form a nation for Himself. His purpose was that the people of God might remain as a counter-culture in the midst of surrounding nations and bring the light of salvation to the world through Jesus Christ, the Messiah, who would come through the lineage of Abraham (Is. 42:6; 49:6; 60:3; Luke 2:32; Acts 13:47; 26:23). God instituted strict boundaries for the conduct of the Israelites in order to shape them for His redemptive purpose. Among the things forbidden to the people of Israel was idolatry of any kind. Idolatry was so grave in the sight of God that He compared it to prostitution or whoredom (Jer. 3:8; 13:27; 29:23; Hos. 3:1; 9:1) and sent Israel into captivity for this sin. God abhorred the sin of idolatry and said:

You shall not make for yourself a carved image—any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments. Ex. 20:4–6

A plain reading of Ex. 20:4–6 seems to give the impression that God will punish innocent children to the third and fourth generation for the sin of idolatry committed by their fathers. If this is true, it contradicts what God said elsewhere that He holds each person accountable for his or her own sins (Deut. 24:16; 2 Chr. 25:4; Ezek. 18:19–22). In fact, the prophet Ezekiel asked the children of Israel why they kept repeating the proverb, “The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge?” (Ezek. 18:2). In Ezekiel’s day, the people of Israel asked: “Why should the son not bear the guilt of the father?” Ezekiel responded, saying:

The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not bear the guilt of the father, nor the father bear the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself. But if a wicked man turns from all his sins which he has committed, keeps all My statutes, and does what is lawful and right, he shall surely live; he shall not die. Ezek. 18:20–21

In the above text, as well as in other similar passages, God explicitly said that a person receives punishment for his or her own sins. “Fathers shall not be put to death for *their* children, nor shall children be put to death for *their* fathers; a person shall be put to death for his own sin” (Deut. 24:16). God holds each person accountable for his or her own actions. Divine punishment is limited to those who hate God.

*God punishes those who hate Him and shows mercy on those who Love Him. God holds each person accountable for his or her sins. This is the sole criterion of divine justice.*

In light of this rule of divine justice, how do we interpret passages, such as Ex. 34:6–7 and Num. 14:18, that say, “The Lord is longsuffering and abundant in mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression; but He by no means clears the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation”? A little knowledge of the cultural background of families in ancient Israel is helpful here. In ancient Israel, as in some Eastern societies today, people lived in extended families, with three or four generations sharing the same house. If an ungodly father engaged in a sinful lifestyle, his children and grandchildren living in the house were also likely to practice the same sinful behavior. It is important to note that the text in question reads: “He by no means clears the guilty.” What this suggests is that if children were punished to third and fourth generation, it was not because their fathers were ungodly, but because they engaged in sinful practices after the pattern of their wicked fathers. John Calvin made this point well:

The only way in which they [children] are accursed for their fathers’ wickedness is in being blinded and abandoned by God, and so left to walk in their parents’ steps. The misery which they suffer in time, and the destruction to which they are finally doomed, are thus punishments inflicted by divine justice, not for the sins of others, but for their own iniquity.<sup>1</sup>

The Jewish Targum (Amplified Aramaic translation of the Hebrew Bible) also supports this view. In it, Exodus 34:6–7 reads as follows:

And the Lord made His Shekinah [visible majesty of God] to pass by before his face, and proclaimed, The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and nigh [close, near] in mercies, abounding to exercise compassion and truth; keeping mercy and bounty for thousands of generations, absolving and remitting guilt, passing by rebellion, and covering sins; pardoning them who convert unto the law, but holding not guiltless in the great day of judgment those who will not convert; visiting the sins of fathers upon *rebellious children* [italics mine] upon the third and upon the fourth generation.

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1. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2008), 245.

Simply stated, God punishes those who hate Him, irrespective of who they are, and shows kindness on those who love Him. In contrast to the duration of the consequences of sin, God's lovingkindness extends to thousands of generations of those who love Him.

Another way of looking at Ex. 34:6–7 is from the point of view of God's covenantal relationship with Israel. During the formation of the covenant community, God dealt with Israel differently than He does with the church in the New Covenant. He often executed judgment swiftly and harshly for the purpose of chastising and disciplining the people of God so that they might become what they were called to be—a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Ex. 19:6). In the context of such a relationship, members of a family were regarded as a single unit, and the whole family was punished for the offense of one member. God wanted to show that no person sins alone; sin corrupts all those who are in contact with the offender. A good example is the punishment of Achan, his family, and livestock for stealing the forbidden items from Jericho (Ex. 7).

Similarly, God destroyed the families of Korah, Dathan, Abiram, and all the people who belonged to them for their rebellion against Moses (Num. 16:25–34). The congregation of Israel asked, “O God, the God of the spirits of all flesh, shall one man sin, and will you be angry with all the congregation?” (Num. 16:22). In the Talmud, this text is illustrated by a parable in which a company of men were on board a ship. One of them took a drill and began to bore a hole under him. The other passengers asked, “What are you doing?” He replied: “What is that to you? I am drilling a hole under my seat. Is that bothering you?” The men replied, “But the water will enter and drown us all!”<sup>2</sup>

This unique relationship and interaction of God with Israel should not be extrapolated indiscriminately to New Covenant believers because of a radical shift in the way God is dealing with the church since the coming of Christ. Just as God was patient with Israel, He shows forbearance toward us by not imposing immediately the wages of our sin (death); rather, He gives us the opportunity to repent and turn to Him for salvation (Rom. 2:4). But soon His forbearance will come to an end, at which moment He shall return to judge sinners and pour His retribution on the wicked (Acts 17:30–31).

*God did not leave Israel without a remedy. He was always ready to pardon and restore them if they repented and turned to Him.*

Keep in mind that even when God dealt with Israel more harshly, He did not leave His people without remedy. God was always ready to pardon His Israel if it repented and turned to Him. After Moses spoke to the people of Israel about God visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation, Moses interceded on their behalf. He prayed: “Pardon the iniquity of this people, I pray, according to the greatness of Your mercy, just as You have forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now. Then the Lord said: ‘I have pardoned, according to your word’” (Num. 14:19–20). In Exodus 20:5 and Ex.

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2. Cohen. A, *Everyman's Talmud* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975), 184.

34:6–7, after God warned the people of the severity of punishment for the sin of idolatry, He assured them that He would show His lovingkindness and mercy for thousands of generations to those who repent. Therefore, if God punished children to the third and fourth generations, it was because they chose to continue in their evil ways without repenting for their actions. God was ready to show mercy and lovingkindness if only they turned to Him.

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## CONCLUSION

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Christians who have experienced the saving grace of God and are secure in Christ have nothing to fear about any “generational curse.” “There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” (Rom. 8:1). A person who is in Christ is a new creation, a “workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10). God in Christ has raised us to sit together with Him and blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places (Eph. 1:3; 2:6).

We must be careful not to apply Old Testament passages to believers under the New Covenant, without due regard to the contextual, historical, cultural, covenantal, and theological scope of the passages. To do so is to misread the text and put ourselves under bondage of the law from which we have been freed by Christ who has fulfilled the law on our behalf (Rom. 10:4).

In this fallen world, we are constantly engaged in spiritual warfare “against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age; against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Eph. 6:12). This spiritual warfare requires that we put on the whole armor of God so that “we may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil” (Eph. 6:11). That is why we must be on guard against evil influences that surround us, including dysfunctional families with destructive behaviors. The Bible says, “Do not be deceived: Evil company corrupts good habits” (1 Cor. 15:33).

But even when we are thrust into an environment where we are subject to destructive influences, we are accountable and responsible for our actions. God judges us for our deeds whether good or bad. The Bible says, “Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life” (Gal. 6:7–8). The good news is that God has not left us to fend for ourselves. He has provided us a remedy in Christ Jesus. “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). *Soli Deo Gloria.*