

### ***Shifting the Blame***

In the name of him who urges us to repent and live, dear friends in Christ: “It’s not my fault.” How many times have you heard that statement used as an excuse or alibi from someone who is clearly in the wrong? Or heard one of its many variants like “You can’t blame me” or “I had no other choice”? Or, one of my favorites, is the more nebulous “It just couldn’t be helped” because it so glibly removes the guilty me from the crime altogether: it was going to happen; it just happened to happen through me. Don’t you see? I’m the victim here. Parents hear such things from their wayward children, teachers from their unruly students, spouses from their erring mates, employers from their shiftless employees, constituents from their corrupt elected officials, and in today’s Old Testament lesson, the Lord is hearing it from his people Israel.

That’s what the proverb the Lord overhears them repeating like a mantra means: “The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.” In other words, “Dad ate something yucky, but the bad taste lingers in my mouth. It’s a metaphorical way of saying “It was our parents who sinned, but we, their children, are being punished for it. And it’s not right. The Lord is not treating us as he should. It’s not our fault.”

What are the circumstances and why are they saying such things? Allow me to explain. The prophet Ezekiel was the Lord’s spokesman to the 11,000 or so Judeans who were taken into captivity, exiled from the Promised Land, and resettled in penal colonies way off in distant Babylon very early in the sixth century BC. This was part of the punishment leveled on the nation of Judah after they tried to rebel against their Babylonian overlords. You see, they, like just about all the other nations of the ancient near east, had been conquered and subsumed into King Nebuchadnezzar’s mighty Babylonian Empire. And that meant paying a heavy annual tribute. Back then you got to pay for the privilege of being conquered. And all the conquered peoples hated it.

Well, it happened that after a decade or so of this, King Jehoiakim, who was the sitting heir to the throne of David, thought he could negotiate a treaty with Egypt whereby his tiny nation of Judah could break free of Babylonian control. He imagined himself to be a brilliant political tactician, and he thought now was the time to defy Nebuchadnezzar and refuse to pay the annual tribute. Turns out he was wrong. When the tribute was overdue, the Babylonian army returned in force to collect it. The promised help from Egypt failed to materialize. And Judah’s rebellion was pretty much over before it started. Nebuchadnezzar was none too happy about having to go through all the trouble of mustering his army and marching it all the way to Judah to subject it all over again. Besides, when you’re the neighborhood bully, you have to make an example of those who defy you so that no one else gets any ideas. So they imposed even heavier taxes on Judah. They put Jehoiakim in chains and carried him off to Babylon where they locked him in a dungeon. And they took the 11,000 others I mentioned. These would have been Jerusalem’s leading citizens and guiding lights: the skilled professionals and the best educated folks – that is, the people most equipped and likely to organize and lead another rebellion sometime in the future. The idea was to head off such a rebellion in advance. So they were uprooted, separated from family and friends, and dragged away to begin new lives in captivity.

And life for these captives was by no means pleasant. They were city dwellers, not used to the hard work of eking out a living from the soil. They weren't properly equipped for it either. They didn't have draft animals and farming tools they needed. Nor were they likely assigned the best farmland available. You don't give hostages prime real estate. So they built ramshackle huts of mud and straw and hung on as best they could, hungry, impoverished, miserable, longing to return to their homeland, and loudly grumbling that their ill fate was due to the Lord and his glaring miscarriage of justice. "We don't deserve this. It's not our fault. The Lord should have punished our parents when they sinned; not us."

How did they reach this conclusion? Well, it's probably because the Babylonian Captivity they were now enduring had been prophesied by Isaiah over 100 years earlier. Back then several of the kings of Judah had led the Lord's people into idolatry: the worship of the Canaanite fertility gods like Baal and Ashtoreth, to include all the immoral behavior and child sacrifices that went along with it. Mind you, for them it wasn't either or, but rather both and. They wanted to worship the Canaanite gods right alongside the Lord. They still liked the idea of being the Lord's chosen race and being the descendants of the people Moses led through the desert and who conquered the Promised Land under Joshua. They wanted the heritage of the Judges, of Kings David and Solomon, and so on. They just didn't like all the do's and don'ts of God's Law. In this regard, the Canaanite gods were a lot more *easy going*, shall we say?

And it wasn't like the kings of Judah forced pagan worship and idolatry on their unwilling subjects. No, the people ate it up. They loved being free of the dictates of God's law and indulging themselves in every form of sinful pleasure while still claiming to be the children of God. They thought it was the best of both worlds.

Needless to say, the Lord – who calls himself a jealous God – didn't share their point of view. So the Lord sent the prophets like Isaiah and many others to call the people to repent and return to Him and to Him alone. He also sent enemies to afflict them and droughts and what not to turn up the heat and show them that he meant business. Such measures sometimes met with limited success. The people would realize they were being disciplined. They'd repent and cast aside their idols and there would be a brief resurgence in faithfulness to the Lord. But it never lasted very long. The moment the Lord lifted his hand of punishment, they'd turn right back to their sinful ways. And so he warned them that there would come a day when he would have no choice but to take the gloves off and let them have it good. That's what the Babylonian exile was: the Lord's ultimate act of discipline.

And that now they were in it, they didn't think it was right. "It's our parents' fault. It was the way they raised us. It's what they taught us. And how come this happened to us and not to all the others who were left behind in Jerusalem? They're just as guilty as we are. Why did they get to stay all comfy and cozy while we got dragged out here to suffer? Why were we singled out? It's so unfair! The fathers ate the sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge."

To which the Lord replies through the prophet Ezekiel, "Stop repeating that stupid proverb. It's wrong. I am dealing with you the way I am for your sins, not for anyone else's. I treat each one of you according to his own deeds. You know what my Law requires. You heard my prophets calling you to repent. You even have the voice of conscience telling you that you're wrong. But you refused to listen. And now you're experiencing exactly what I warned you about."

And this is important: by shifting the blame to their parents, by seeing others committing the same sins and apparently not being called to account for them and thinking it unfair, the people in exile were missing the whole point. It's not about them. It's never about them. It's always about *you*. It's about *your* sin. The Lord calls *you* to repent. And he has put his hand of discipline on you now so that you will acknowledge your sin and repent and live. He doesn't want you to die in your sin. He wants to save you – even if this exile is what it takes to get you there. His desire is that you repent and live, for he takes no pleasure in the death of anyone.

And in the wisdom of God, the exile was precisely the means by which the Lord saved and preserved his people. On one level, it was because through their suffering and the Word the Lord declared to them by Ezekiel that they eventually did come to own their sin, admit their guilt, repent, and return to the Lord. On another level, it was their being in Babylon that saved them from destruction when God's judgment fell on those who remained behind in Jerusalem. You see, the vast majority of the people, the ones who remained behind in Jerusalem, assumed that those who had been taken away must have been the worst offenders – that's why the Lord removed them. Which meant, of course, from their perspective, that the Lord is pleased with us. That's why we're still here. So they continued doing what they had been all along thinking they were just fine and that there was no need for them to repent. The truth is that the Lord knew they were hardened sinners who wouldn't admit their guilt and repent no matter what kind of discipline he inflicted upon them. And a few years later, when they rebelled again against their Babylonian masters, this time he had the imperial army return and destroy them completely. No one left behind was spared. Only God's people in captivity were safe and alive. Years later, the Lord allowed them to return to the Promised Land and reestablish their nation.

So the Lord used the worst thing the people could imagine, their exile to a foreign land and their miserable existence there, to save them. That's how far he's willing to go – as far as it takes. And he wants us to know this because that's how he deals with us too.

For we too always want to pass the buck. We come up with all kinds of excuses for our sins. And one of the perpetual favorites is shifting the blame and saying, "It's not my fault. It's somebody else's." Be it parents, or friends, or bad influences, or what we watch on TV, or the times in which we live, or the sad circumstances of my life – whatever, we can always find an excuse. And we also like to point to the apparent inequity in the way God metes out discipline. "I'm only as guilty as the next guy. Why you picking on me? You're so unfair!"

The answer is always the same: I the Lord am calling you to repent. It's not your job to tell me how to deal with them. You can't see into their hearts. I alone know what each person needs. You leave them to me. This is about you. I want *you* to repent and live. So stop thinking I'm being unfair. Stop shifting the blame. Let's look at your sin. Shift the blame back to yourself. Own it. Repent of it. Turn from it. Because I want you to live.

And here's the marvelous thing: when we do shift the blame for our sins back to ourselves, when we own them and repent of them, the Lord himself does some blame shifting – he shifts the blame to Jesus, his own beloved Son. He puts our guilt upon him. On the cross he dies so that we can live – declared righteous for his sake. If you want to complain about a miscarriage of justice, that's it; but that's how far the Lord is willing to go to save you. And everything else you experience, the good and the ill God sends you, is part of his gracious plan to bring you safely through your exile here to his eternal Promised Land through Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord. In his holy name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***