

The Iniquity of the Fathers visited Upon Their Children

Edward Payson

"Visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and fourth generation." Exodus 34:7

In this passage we have a part of the name of Jehovah, as proclaimed by himself. In the preceding chapter we find Moses praying for a manifestation of those attributes in which the divine glory essentially consists. I beseech thee, said he, show me thy glory. This request God answered by saying, I will make all my goodness to pass before thee; and will proclaim before thee the name of the Lord. This promise he fulfilled. The Lord, says the inspired penman, descended in a cloud, and proclaimed the name of the Lord. And the Lord passed by before him, and proclaimed, Jehovah, Jehovah God, merciful and gracious, long suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth; keeping mercy for thousands; forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin; and by no means clearing the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and fourth generation. On hearing this adorable name, thus proclaimed, Moses made haste, and bowed his head, and worshipped; thus expressing his cordial acquiescence in all that God had revealed respecting his character, and the maxims of his government. Everyone who possesses the temper of Moses, will feel disposed, on hearing this name, to follow his example. But it is more than probable that all present do not possess his temper; and that some, on hearing that part of God's name which has been read as our text, will rather feel disposed to ask, how can it be just, how can it be made to appear consistent with our ideas of perfect rectitude, for God to visit the iniquity of men upon their posterity; or, as the expression evidently means, to punish children, and children's children, for the sins of their parents? To answer these questions by stating the true import of the passage, and showing that the method of proceeding, which it describes, is perfectly just, is my design in the present discourse.

With this view, I remark,

1. That this passage has no reference whatsoever, to God's treatment of mankind, in a future state. It does not mean that God will punish children in a future state for the sins of their parents; but the visitation or punishment which it threatens, is exclusively temporal. This is evident from a passage in the eighteenth chapter of Ezekiel, where God, speaking of the death to which his law dooms transgressors, says, The soul that sinneth, it shall die. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son. In another passage, he says, The fathers shall not die for their children, neither

shall the children die for the fathers; but every man shall die for his own sin. The same truth is clearly taught in the many passages which assure us, that, at the judgment day, God will reward every man according to his works. Not, you will observe, according to the works of his parents, but according to his own works; nor is the smallest intimation to be found in the Bible, that, in dispensing eternal rewards and punishments, God will pay any regard to the conduct of a man's ancestors, whatever it may have been. I remark,

2. That God never visits children even with temporal judgments for the sins of their parents, unless they imitate, and thus justify their parents' offences. This, he himself declares, in the most positive and unequivocal manner. The impious Jews, while suffering the just punishment of their own offences, made use of this proverb; The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge; that is, our fathers have sinned, and we, their children, are punished for it. They thus justified themselves by insinuating that the calamities which they suffered were not the consequence of their own conduct, and at the same time, accused God of injustice. The ways of the Lord, said they, are not equal, or equitable. For this impious and groundless complaint, God severely reproveth them, declares that they shall no more use this proverb, and shows, in the clearest manner, that they had no cause to use it. He assures these murmurers that, if a wicked man has a son who seeth all his father's sins, and considereth and doeth them not, but executeth God's judgments, and walketh in his statutes, he shall not die for the iniquity of his father, but shall surely live. With this assurance, the divine conduct, as described in the Old Testament, corresponds. Hezekiah, Josiah, and many other pious men were the children of exceedingly wicked parents; but as they shunned the sins of their fathers, and were supremely devoted to God, they enjoyed his favor in a very high degree, and were visited with no marks of displeasure on account of their progenitors.

There is, however, one apparent exception to these remarks, which must be noticed. It is evident from facts, that even pious children often suffer in consequence of the wicked conduct of their parents. If a father be idle, or extravagant; if he squander his property by gaming, or intemperance, or destroy his reputation by scandalous crimes, or ruin his constitution by sensual indulgences; his children, and perhaps his children's children, may suffer in consequence; nor will any degree of piety always shield them from such sufferings. Those sufferings ought not, however, to be considered as punishments inflicted by God; but merely as the natural consequences of their parents' misconduct; and even these consequences, though painful, will be overruled for their benefit; for all things work together for good to them that love God. It must, however, be added, that the sinful example and conduct of wicked parents has a most powerful tendency to prevent their children from becoming pious, to induce them to pursue vicious courses, and thus to bring upon them divine judgments. Such parents seldom, if ever, give their children good advice, or a religious education, but suffer them to grow up, almost without restraint, with a bad example in its most influential form, ever before their eyes. Hence,

wickedness often descends in families from generation to generation, becoming more deep and inveterate as it descends, till long delayed vengeance overtakes the guilty race, and blots their very name from the earth. I remark,

3. That our text describes God's method of proceeding with nations, and civil or ecclesiastical communities, rather than with individuals. I do not say that it has no reference to individuals, but that it refers principally to nations, states and churches. It seems designed to teach us that God often visits one generation with national judgments, on account of the sins of preceding generations; or in other words, that in punishing a nation, at one period of its existence, he has respect to sins of which it had been guilty during former periods. For instance, when he doomed the Canaanites to destruction, he had respect not only to the sins of that generation which was destroyed, but to all the sins of which the nation had been guilty, from the commencement of its political existence. This is evident from his informing Abraham that the Canaanites could not be immediately destroyed, because their iniquity was not then full; but that after four generations should have passed away, their measure would be full, and their destruction would be effected. In a similar manner he dealt with the Amalekites. That nation made a cruel, treacherous, and unprovoked assault upon the Israelites in the wilderness. God then declared that he would punish the nation of Amalek for that offence; but the punishment was deferred for some hundreds of years, and was then inflicted with awful severity; and the destruction of the Amalekites which then took place, was expressly stated to be on account of the sin committed so many years before, by a preceding generation.

By similar maxims God was governed, in his dealings with the Jews. The Babylonish captivity was designed as a punishment, not only for the sins of that generation, which was actually carried away, but for the sins of the preceding generation. And so the present dispersion of the Jews, with all the calamities which, for eighteen hundred years, have overwhelmed that devoted people, is a continued expression of the divine displeasure against the sin of which their fathers were guilty, in crucifying the Son of God, of whom they said, His blood be on us and on our children. Our Saviour himself said to that generation, by whom he was crucified, Fill ye up the measure of your fathers, that upon you may come all the righteous blood, shed from the foundation of the world: from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zacharias whom ye slew between the temple and the altar. That we may perceive the justice, wisdom and propriety of this method of proceeding, it is necessary to consider the following things.

It is indispensably necessary to the perfection of God's moral government that it should extend to nations and communities, as well as to individuals. This, I conceive, is too evident to require proof; for how could God be considered as the moral governor of the world, if nations and communities were exempt from his government? Again, if God is to exercise a moral government, over nations and communities, by rewarding or punishing them according to their works, the rewards and punishments must evidently be dispensed, in this world; for nations

and communities will not exist, as such, in the world to come. In that world, God must deal with men, considered simply as individuals. Further, it seems evidently proper, that communities as well as individuals, should have a time of trial and probation allowed them; that if the first generation prove sinful, the community should not be immediately destroyed, but that the punishment should be suspended, till it be seen whether the nation will prove incorrigible, or whether some succeeding generation will not repent of the national sins, and thus avert national judgments. Now it is evident, that if God thus waits upon nations, as he does upon individuals, and allows them a season of probation, a space for repentance, he cannot destroy them, until many generations of sinners are laid in their graves. Besides, by thus suspending the rod, or the sword over a nation, he presents to it powerful inducements to reform. He appeals to parental feelings, to men's affection for their posterity; and endeavors to deter them from sin, by the assurance that their posterity will suffer for it. In connection with these remarks, we must recollect, what has been already stated, that God never punishes a generation for the sins of its ancestors, unless it imitates their conduct, unless it is guilty of similar or more aggravated offences, and thus justifies the wicked conduct of preceding generations. Besides, as sinful nations, like individuals, if they do not reform, usually become worse, it will ever be found that the last days of a nation, are its worst days, and that the generation which is destroyed, is more abandoned than all preceding generations. I will only add, that when God forsakes or destroys a nation, for its national sins, he does not inflict more upon that generation which is destroyed, than its own sins deserve, though he punishes them more severely than he would leave done, were it not for the guilt which has been accumulated by the generations which have preceded it. From these statements and considerations, I conceive that not only the justice, but the wisdom and propriety of the divine proceedings, must appear evident to every calm and unprejudiced mind. If doubts respecting it still remain, permit me to attempt their removal by the following statement.

Suppose that from the commencement of our existence as a nation, some other nation had without provocation treated us in the most hostile and injurious manner, interrupting our commerce, murdering our fellow-citizens, and finally, forcibly seizing, and unjustly retaining a part of our territory. Suppose the generation by whom these acts of hostility were committed, to be all laid in their graves, and a new generation to succeed, who, instead of making any reparation for the injuries we had sustained from their fathers, should repeat the same injuries, and retain the territory which they had unjustly acquired

Should we not feel that we had just cause of complaint against this new generation; that they were, in effect, accessories in the crimes of their fathers, and deserving of the punishment due to those crimes? And supposing war, in any case, to be just, should we not feel it just to make war upon that nation, at any succeeding period of its existence, so long as its offences were repeated, and the territory which it had unjustly acquired was retained? My hearers, God's visiting the iniquities of the fathers upon the children, implies no more than is

involved in this supposition. Who then will deny his method of proceeding to be just?

My hearers, the subject we have been considering, would, at any time, be interesting and instructive, but there is something in our present situation, which renders it, at this time, peculiarly so. As a community, we are just entering on a new mode of political existence. We are now separated from our parent State, and have no further concern in its sins or its virtues, except what results from our connection with it, as members of the Union. But though we have no other concern with the sins of which it may hereafter be guilty, it is evident from our subject that we are still deeply interested in the sinfulness and guilt contracted by that State, during the period of our political connection with it. In that sinfulness we shared; in accumulating that guilt we assisted, and should God visit our parent State for its sins, we must expect to share in the visitation, unless previous repentance and reform prevent. Had the State, at the period of our separation, been burdened with a debt which it was unable to discharge, we must have been charged with our proportion of it; and the same remark will apply to the debt which is due to divine justice. It becomes us, then, to look back and inquire of what sins the State was guilty during our connection with it. With respect to the primitive fathers, or first settlers of the State, it was intimated in the morning, that they were, in a very uncommon degree, devoted to God. No other nation can boast of such ancestors, to no other nation has so small a share of guilt been transmitted by its founders. But it is too evident to require proof, that our immediate ancestors have sunk very far below the standard of their forefathers. The progress of those vices which principally tend to draw down divine judgments upon a people, has been constant, rapid, and highly alarming. Dissipation, intemperance, profanation of the Sabbath, neglect of divine institutions, and profane language have burst in upon us like an overwhelming flood. The prevalence of perjury, or false swearing, is, if possible, still more alarming. To say nothing of the little regard paid, in many cases, to oaths of office, how terribly have our commercial transactions, for some years, been polluted by this crime! Of what palpable perjuries have great numbers of our fellow-citizens been guilty, both at home and in foreign lands; and how largely have those who employed them, participated in the guilt! We may think little of this, and flatter ourselves that customary oaths are trifles; but be assured, my hearers, that when God is, on any occasion, called to bear witness to a transaction, he witnesses it; and woe be to the wretch who calls upon the God of truth to bear witness to a lie. God will not hold him guiltless who taketh his name in vain; nor will he field a nation or community guiltless in which this sin prevails. Even you, my hearers, would think it the greatest of insults should a man impudently call upon you to testify to the truth of a known lie. With what feelings, then, must the God of truth hear himself so frequently called upon to bear such testimony?

But to return from what is, perhaps, a digression; —if these and other sins have grossly prevailed, in our parent State, and in this part of it, during the period of

our political union, then, unless we repent of these sins; and much more, if we persist in them, we may be certain that God will, sooner or later, visit upon its the iniquity of our fathers. We shall commence our separate existence with our measure of iniquity partly filled, and our own sins will soon fill it to the brim.

In the second place, this subject will teach us not only to reflect upon the past, but to look forward to the future. If God in his dealings with civil communities, visits the sins of parents upon their children, then he will visit our sins upon our children. We shall suffer for them in the world to come, and they will suffer for them in this world. We often speak of acting for our posterity, of providing for their happiness; but in no way can we promote their happiness so effectually, as by abstaining from sin; in no way can we do more to destroy it, than by continuing in sin. We profess to have been actuated, partly at least, if not principally, by a concern for their interest, in seeking the separation which has taken place. But what will it avail for them to be a separate State, if we indirectly separate them from the favor and blessing of heaven? What will it avail to bequeath to them our civil and religious privileges, if the bequest, in consequence of our sins, is accompanied with heaven's curse? A measure of iniquity nearly full is a terrible inheritance to bequeath to posterity. Yet such an inheritance we shall certainly transmit to them, unless a more general reformation, than there seems any reason to expect, should prevent. May God have mercy upon our posterity, for I fear we shall have none.

In the third place; this subject may be interesting and instructive to many of us, not only as members of the community to which we belong, but as individuals. Are there any present, who are descended from along line of irreligious ancestors; who can scarcely find, among their progenitors, one devoted servant of God? Surely, such have reason to tremble, lest a curse should be entailed upon a race, which has been so long estranged from God. Are there any whose immediate ancestors have lived without God, in the world? Let such remember that if they would not be visited for the sins of their fathers, they must forsake their fathers' sinful ways. Are there any, who, while their parents remain strangers to God, have been led to know and serve him themselves? What reason have such to bless and adore the sovereign mercy, which, instead of leaving them under the load of derived and personal guilt, has visited them with salvation. Are there parents present, who know not God? It surely becomes them to lay this subject seriously to heart, lest they should treasure up wrath for their descendants. Let me entreat such parents to reflect how soothing, how delightful it must be to be able, in their expiring moments, to bequeath to their children, and their children's children, the blessing of a pious father; to be able, with dying Jacob, to say, The God of my fathers, the God who has fed me all my life long, the Angel who redeemed me from all evil, bless my children, and be their God. Surely, if there be a delightful spectacle on earth, it is that of a dying father, who after having guided his children in the way of peace by his principles and example, expires while the blessing which he bequeaths to them, trembles on his lips. On the other hand, what sight can be more dreadful than that of a dying

sinner, —his own gloomy prospect rendered tenfold more dismal by the reflection that his own children are involved for time, perhaps for eternity, in the consequences of his transgressions.

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