

Ten Lesson 3 Article

Sins of Parents?

Although this verse (20:5) seems to say that God punishes children for the sins of their parents, that is not the case. God does not condemn children because of their parents' misbehavior (see Dt 24:16; Ezk 18:20). However, children suffer the consequences of their parents' sinful choices. A parent's adultery, substance abuse, manipulation or other dysfunctional behavior establishes a pattern that children model as they mature. The result can be a repetition of their parents' emotional brokenness leading to conflict, divorce, poverty or other conditions that make their children's, and even their grandchildren's, lives difficult.

In this verse God suggests that one reason we should obey Him is for the sake of our children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. Like ripples spreading across a pool of calm water, our actions have consequences for generations to come. We can create waves of difficulty or blessing (v. 6), according to the choices we make.¹

This oft-repeated³⁴ theme speaks of God's determination to punish successive generations for committing the same sins they learned from their parents. In other words, God will not say, "I won't punish this generation for what they are doing to break my covenant because, after all, they merely learned it from their parents who did it too." Instead, God will indeed punish generation after generation ("to the third and fourth generation"³⁵) if they keep doing the same sorts of sins that prior generations did. If the children continue to do the sins their parents did, they will receive the same punishments as their parents.

But to this is contrasted his real wish: to show "covenant loyalty" [NIV "love"] to "a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments." By the greatest numerical contrast in the Bible (three/four to thousands), God identified eloquently his real desire: to have his people remain loyal forever so that he might in turn show them the rich blessings of his resulting loyalty to them. In vv. 5b–6 the terminology "love" and "hate" refers idiomatically to loyalty, not to emotional attitudes, feelings, or sentiment.³⁶

¹ Cabal, T., Brand, C. O., Clendenen, E. R., Copan, P., Moreland, J., & Powell, D. (2007). *The Apologetics Study Bible: Real Questions, Straight Answers, Stronger Faith* (115). Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers.

³⁴ E.g., Exod 34:7; Num 14:18; Deut 5:9; Jer 32:18.

³⁵ "Third and fourth" is idiomatic in Hb. for "whatever number" or "plenty of"; cf. Amos 1:3, 6, 11, 13; 2:1, 4, 6; Prov 30:15, 18, 21, 29. On the significance of the contrast between punishing for "three or four" generations out of necessity to enforce the covenant but being willing to bless for thousands, cf. S. Gevirtz, *Patterns in the Early Poetry of Israel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), esp. 18–21.

³⁶ See above, n. 3.

² Stuart, D. K. (2006). *Vol. 2: Exodus*. The New American Commentary (454). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.