

Interactive Sunday #3

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What is your take on generational curses? Can you explain the subject? Is it relevant in this day and age?

Let me begin with a question for you: Can you think of any negative traits or habits in your life that have been in your family line for generations?

Perhaps you can identify negative patterns such as addictions, verbal or physical abuse, pornography, racism, bitterness, rage, fearfulness, persistent immorality, or depression. These areas of personal bondage may be the result of a genetic predisposition, or the result of your childhood environment and training, or of a binding influence passed down through some other means.

Some people refer to these as “generational curses,” because they survive and are passed on for generations. This is a relatively recent topic, that has been strengthened by the increase of scientific and psychological knowledge in the last 150 years.

Prior to that, particularly among the Jewish people, “generational curses” referred to the overflow of divine judgment, sometimes from the sins of individuals to their descendants, but more often from the common sins of one generation to the next—temporal judgment revealed in such things as oppression and combat from other nations, or famine, or natural blight, or disaster. Many people still wonder today if such events demonstrate the hand of God’s judgment against a society or a people group.

For a few, the term may refer to the effect of spoken curses that endure for multiple generations, especially within a particular family lineage.

Whatever the meaning, and whatever the resulting bondage may be, know this: the Lord wants to rebuild, restore, and renew these areas that have been troubled and devastated—whenever and wherever people turn to God through Jesus Christ. More about this in a few minutes...

Let’s look at three passages of Scripture, from which these ideas have grown.

Exodus 20:5-6 (NET)

“You shall not bow down to [idols] or serve them, for I, the Lord, your God, am a jealous God, responding to the transgression of fathers by dealing with children to the third and fourth generations of those who reject me.”

Exodus 34:6-7 (NET)

The Lord passed by before [Moses] and proclaimed: "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, and abounding in loyal love and faithfulness, keeping loyal love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin. But He by no means leaves the guilty unpunished, responding to the transgression of fathers by dealing with children and children's children, to the third and fourth generation."

Leviticus 26:39 (NET)

"As for the ones who remain among you, they will rot away because of their iniquity in the lands of your enemies, and they will also rot away because of their ancestors' iniquities which are with them."

In the two Exodus passages this phrase is repeated: *"by dealing with children to the third and fourth generations."* The verse in Leviticus offers *"because of their ancestors' iniquities,"* which looks very similar. These have lent credibility to the popular notion that God punishes successive generations for the sins of their forefathers.

However, other Scripture passages stand in strong contrast to these. Here are three samples:

Deuteronomy 24:16 (NLT)

Parents must not be put to death for the sins of their children, nor children for the sins of their parents. Those deserving to die must be put to death for their own crimes.

2 Kings 14:6 (NLT)

However, he did not kill the children of the assassins, for he obeyed the command of the Lord as written by Moses in the Book of the Law: "Parents must not be put to death for the sins of their children, nor children for the sins of their parents. Those deserving to die must be put to death for their own crimes."

Ezekiel 18:20 (NLT)

The person who sins is the one who will die. The child will not be punished for the parent's sins, and the parent will not be punished for the child's sins. Righteous people will be rewarded for their own righteous behavior, and wicked people will be punished for their own wickedness.

Now all of these passages are the inspired, true, and infallible Word of God. So how do they fit together? What can we learn about "generational curses"?

Theology Explains

First, the sins of the fathers are punished in the children because they have become the sins of the children. Notice, at the end of Exodus 20:6 these words: *"of those who reject Me."* It would

not be the innocent children of the idol-worshiping forefathers, but those who also rejected God, and likely in a similar way, repeating their forefathers' sins. A Jewish Targum (rabbinic commentary) specifies that this passage refers to "ungodly fathers" and "rebellious children."

The same is suggested in Exodus 34:7 by the words, "*He by no means leaves the guilty unpunished,*" referring to the (similar) guilt of the succeeding generations.

This is clarified further in the Leviticus passage by the words, "*iniquities which are with them,*" referring to the children's iniquities which were similar to their ancestors.

The notion, then, that God punishes children and grandchildren for the sins of their parents is patently false. But children and grandchildren do sometimes demonstrate similar sinful behaviors, "inherited" from their ancestors, and, if they do, for these, they, like their ancestors, will be punished. That's a promise, and not an unreasonable one.

And yet, the blood of Jesus, shed on the cross, conquers all sin and judgment for those who believe and entrust themselves to Him. (However, it can do nothing for those who reject Him.)

How do the sins of the fathers become the sins of their children? We are not told in these passages, but the book of Genesis informs and reminds us that the original blame for the mess we are in goes all the way back to everyone's first father and mother—Adam and Eve. Not that we have not mimicked their sin ourselves and invented a thousand others of our own, but generational sin and its generational curse began there and then, and has passed down to every succeeding generation.

That's why every individual born into this world has both the propensity and the capacity for sin, and we all have sinned. You didn't need anyone to teach you how. Sin comes naturally to us, as part of the generational relationships that God has designed. And each person in every generation has the capacity and the opportunity to begin a new legacy—to choose Life in Jesus' name.

Science Agrees

Some recent scientific studies offer an additional perspective of how sins may become generational.

Pioneering studies in epigenetics reveals that our life experiences and choices do change us, including our brains, down to the DNA level. And these changes can be passed on to our children and even further down the hereditary line.

Epigenetics is information that sits above the genome, which controls the programming of DNA, instructing different cells how to express themselves, and this information is developed

by our experiences and our choices. In an interview with neuropsychologist Dr. Jes Montgomery, he explained, “Sensations we put into the brain will use the DNA to change how the cell responds. And those genes are turned ‘off’ or ‘on’ based on what that response is. While the DNA doesn’t change, the expression does.”

In other words, the DNA has a built-in proclivity or pattern of response, but this may be adjusted by epigenetic information, based on our choices. Wow! So we are not genetic robots, after all!

Epigenetics reveals that not only do we pass along the DNA sequence to our children, but we also pass along the epigenetic instructions to them. In other words, behavioral information can be inherited and transmitted through generations.

In an experiment on “transgenerational epigenetic inheritance,” researchers at Emory University (Atlanta, Georgia) trained mice to fear a fruity odor by pairing it with a mild electric shock to the foot. Ten days later, those same mice were allowed to mate. Astonishingly, their pups feared the odor even without having encountered the smell before. Even more fascinating is that the offspring of those pups—the grandchildren—were born with the same specific memory.

One example of an application of these findings among humans was connected to the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Among the thousands of people directly exposed to the attacks were 1,700 pregnant women. Some of these women developed symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Their children also reacted with high levels of fear and stress around loud noises, unfamiliar people, or new foods. It seems the infants inherited the nightmare that their mothers experienced on that day.

The good news is that even if epigenetic modifications are passed on to your offspring, they are not determinative; they are adjustable, even reversible. In other words, it is possible to break the curse. “You can go either way. We can pass along either positive things in our life or negative things, depending on the choices we make in life,” said neuropsychiatrist Dr. Tim Jennings. Our responsive choices alter how our genes are expressed.

No Longer A Slave

So nobody, either in the Old Testament or the New Testament, or today under the New Covenant in Christ, is trapped or enslaved or in bondage or under an unbreakable curse because of something their ancestors did, or even something they themselves did. Neither your parents’ sin nor your own can nullify the revelation given to Moses (Exodus 34:6): *“The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, and abounding in loyal love and faithfulness, keeping loyal love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.”*

As if for emphasis and completeness, God promised threefold mercies: *“forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.”* “Sin” means to miss the mark (the target). “Transgression” is the manifestation of sin (crossing the line). “Iniquity” is the ongoing practice of sin or a persistent weakness to yield to a particular sin. God has said that, no matter the depth of your fall, God’s grace is greater. He can break the curse over your life. You can be free.

Ezekiel 33:14-16 (NLT)

“And suppose I tell some wicked people that they will surely die, but then they turn from their sins and do what is just and right. For instance, they might give back a debtor’s security, return what they have stolen, and obey my life-giving laws, no longer doing what is evil. If they do this, then they will surely live and not die. None of their past sins will be brought up again, for they have done what is just and right, and they will surely live.”

Make Good Choices

Your choices matter, not only to you but also to those who come after you. Hear the cry of Moses to the Hebrew people:

Deuteronomy 30:19 (NLT)

“Today I have given you the choice between life and death, between blessings and curses. Now I call on heaven and earth to witness the choice you make. Oh, that you would choose life, so that you and your descendants might live!”

“You and your descendants.” When you choose Christ, many people are affected. There is more to your salvation than simply “going to Heaven.”

To the parents with us today, no one who has a child who goes bad and forsakes the way of the Lord should feel it’s all his or her fault. Listen to the prophet’s words:

Ezekiel 18:20 (NLT)

The person who sins is the one who will die. The child will not be punished for the parent’s sins, and the parent will not be punished for the child’s sins. Righteous people will be rewarded for their own righteous behavior, and wicked people will be punished for their own wickedness.

In other words, our children bear real responsibilities in their own hearts toward God. Don’t be paralyzed by thinking that all of their waywardness is due to you. Deal with your own sins, whatever they may be, and pray that your children will also deal with their sins.

The fact is this: All humanity are under a curse because of the Law that God gave to Moses. The Law pronounced a blessing on those who thoroughly obeyed it, but a curse on all who did not. As James reminded us in his letter (James 2:10), whoever violates the Law in one point

has violated the whole thing. This is why Jesus did not condemn sinners; we were all condemned already (even if we were unaware of the Law). Jesus came to save us!

If disobedience to God brings a curse, then this has impacted us all—every human on the planet—for we have all been born with sin (inner antagonism toward God).

Isaiah 53:6 (NLT)

“All of us, like sheep, have strayed away. We have left God’s paths to follow our own. Yet the Lord laid on Him (Jesus) the sins of us all.”

The Four R’s

We must all learn to practice the four R’s of the Christian walk, whenever dealing with your own sins or the known sins of a previous generation: Repent, Rebuke, Replace, and Receive. (Write this down.)

“Repent” means I make up my mind that God is right and I am wrong, and I choose to change and follow His way, with His help.

“Rebuke” means, in the authority of Jesus’ name, I rebuke our enemy, the devil, who has tempted, harassed, and lied to me.

“Replace” means I utter words of truth, based upon the Scriptures, to replace the lies I had heeded and followed.

“Receive” means I invite the Holy Spirit to fill each weakened area of my life with His cleansing power and healing love.

Jesus is the answer to every generational repercussion. Jesus took our curse and gives us His blessing!

When it comes to generational curses of any kind and from any source, Christians should lay hold of this declaration:

Galatians 3:13 (NLT)

Christ has rescued us from the curse pronounced by the law. When He was hung on the cross, He took upon Himself the curse for our wrongdoing. For it is written in the Scriptures, “Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.”

Christ has paid every debt and broken every curse. The key is to believe that and act on it. As a start, now say out loud, “Christ has rescued me. Every curse has been broken. Thanks be to God!”