

The Biblical Basis for Identificational Repentance

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Go up and down the streets of Jerusalem, look around and consider, search through her squares. If you can find but one person who deals honestly and seeks the truth, I will forgive this city. . . . O Lord, do not your eyes look for truth? You struck them, but they felt no pain; you crushed them, but they refused correction. They made their faces harder than stone and refused to repent (Jeremiah 5:1-3).

Think about it. God promises to forgive an *entire city* if just *one person* deals *honestly*, seeks the *truth*, and *repents*. If just one person humbly abides in God’s presence long enough for the light of God’s truth to expose sin, the Lord says that forgiveness will burst forth from the heart of that individual out toward the city limits. Can one repentant person really unleash God’s forgiveness upon a city?

It may be much easier to accept another scenario: generation after generation relentlessly “hardens their faces” by refusing to repent of their sins. As time goes on, we might wonder if God ever addresses the perpetual iniquity that occurs in our cities. Does sin somehow accumulate to a point that it sets off His divine alarm clock? Or does God simply cancel out of history all unrepentant sin once the sinner dies?

There are some compelling arguments in the Bible that suggest that certain transgressions produce real and certain consequences for future generations. For example, Jesus seemed to affirm the notion that generational iniquities can accrue over time by pointing out that the Pharisees “filled up” the “measure of the sin” of their forefathers (Matt. 23:32-35). Paul applies the same principle to evildoers who “always heap up their sins to the limit. The wrath of God has come upon them at last” (1 Thess. 2:16). Even Abraham was told that there would be a delay in the return of his descendents to the land because the sin of the Amorites must reach its “full measure” (Gen. 15:16). The psalmist, being very much aware of this reality, relented: “Do not hold against us the sins of the fathers; may your mercy come quickly to meet us, for we are in desperate need. Help us, O God our Savior, for the glory of your name; deliver us and forgive our sins for your name’s sake” (Ps. 79:8-9).

It may be helpful to consider the four Hebrew words (and their Greek equivalents) that describe sinful behavior. Notice how these words imply that generational sin-cycles seem to “snowball” into utter depravity over time.

Hebrew and Greek Words for Sin	Translation and Meaning	Scripture References
<i>hata</i> <i>hamartano</i>	Sin: to miss the mark/way To fall short of the standard; to fail to fulfill obligations (incomplete, lacking wholeness)	“All have sinned and come short of the glory of God” Rom. 3:23 “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” Acts 2:38
<i>peshā</i> <i>parabasis</i>	Transgression: to rebel To deliberately revolt; to cast off allegiance generates guilt and duplicity (deceit, distortions, dullness)	“You were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air” Eph. 2:1-2 “As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us” Ps. 103:12

Hebrew and Greek Words for Sin	Translation and Meaning	Scripture References
<p><i>avon</i></p> <p><i>anomia</i></p>	<p>Iniquity: to deviate, stray</p> <p>To indulge; loss of self-control</p> <p>(compulsive, addictive, self-destructive behavior)</p>	<p>“You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence” Ps. 90:8 (cf. Ps. 107:17)</p> <p>“After the suffering of his soul, [Christ] will see the light <i>of life</i> and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities” Isa. 53:11</p>
<p><i>ra`ah</i></p> <p><i>poneros</i></p>	<p>Wickedness/evil: perverse, vicious disposition</p> <p>To consciously reject God in order to embrace idolatry</p> <p>(devoid of understanding the injury caused by exploitive habitual abuse)</p>	<p>“Concerning the sinfulness of the wicked: There is no fear of God before his eyes. For in his own eyes he flatters himself too much to detect or hate his sin. The words of his mouth are wicked and deceitful; he has ceased to be wise and to do good. Even on his bed he plots evil; he commits himself to a sinful course and does not reject what is wrong” Ps. 36:1-4 (cf. Jer. 4:22)</p> <p>“Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon” Isa. 55:7</p>

The four Hebrew/Greek words for “sin” indicate that sin can become more sinister when certain choices are made over time. In a literal sense, to “sin” is to “miss the mark” (to try to do what is right but fall short of it); to “transgress” is to “deliberately rebel” (to choose to do something that causes guilt); to “engage in iniquity” is to delve into self-destructive behavior (uncontrollable habits); and to “delve in wickedness” is to enter the realm of cruelty.¹

It is clear that generational iniquities form identifiable patterns of behavior (or traits) within certain families, which in turn, affect whole nations (Ps. 78:57; Acts 7:51; e.g., 1 Kgs. 16:2, 26; 22:43, 52; 2 Kgs. 8:18, 27; 16:3; 17:14, 22-23; 21:21; 23:36-37; 24:1-4; 2 Chron. 21:13; 2 Chron. 22:3; 28:2; Ezek. 16:47). Moreover, there is an obvious reference to the familial sin-cycle in the first two of the Ten Commandments:

You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments” (Exodus 20:3-6 NAS).

Here Moses makes it clear that all iniquity is rooted in some form of idolatry; fellowship with an idol enslaves the individual to the spiritual entity instigating the idolatry and handcuffs his family to the particular iniquitous behavior associated with that evil being (Deut. 32:16-17; Ps. 106:36-

¹ Paul makes it clear that God’s law was added (to the gospel of salvation) because of transgression (deliberate sin) (Gal. 3:19). The purpose of the law is: 1) to clarify what is sin (or stated more positively, God’s laws reflect his character and clarify his will), 2) to expose sin and arouse conviction (if sin remains hidden then its essential qualities are misunderstood as being beneficial), 3) to reveal how sin may be removed so that the contrite can be reconciled to God, and 4) to convince the redeemed to live by God’s grace, in his presence and in truth.

37; 1 Cor. 10:19-21). When people begin to follow “worthless idols” the people begin to reflect the likeness of their gods (cf. 2 Kgs. 17:15b; Hos. 9:10).

God describes such idolatrous connections as spiritual prostitution (cf. Hos. 4:10-12; 5:4; Ezek. 5:13; 8:3, 5; 16:38). His jealousy provokes him to “visit” (*paqad*) the iniquitous influence of the forefathers on their descendents. The Hebrew word *paqad* indicates that God exercises his “oversight over a subordinate, either in the form of inspection or of taking action to cause a considerable change in the circumstances of the subordinate, either for the better or for the worse.”² Essentially, *paqad* is a divine inspection of the generational iniquities that have cumulated over time (cf. Dan. 9:14). Unfortunately, the end result is that descendents can and often do experience the spiritual oppression that accompanies previous family alignment with demonic entities.

It follows logically that when one person humbly acknowledges personal sin, generational iniquity in that family will frequently be uncovered (Ps. 32:5; 85:2). Isaiah confesses to God: “our offenses are many in your sight, and our sins testify against us. Our offenses are ever with us, and we acknowledge our iniquities” (Isa. 59:12). According to Neal Anderson, “Iniquities can be passed on from one generation to the next if you don’t renounce the sins of your ancestors and claim your new spiritual heritage in Christ. You are not guilty for the sin of any ancestor, but because of their sin, you may be vulnerable to Satan’s attack.”³ Beth Moore agrees; she points out that Satan, our ancient foe, has been around since the beginning of time as we know it: “We can safely assume he and his cohorts know more about our family heritage than the most extensive genealogical research could uncover. If knowledge is power, our enemy is pretty powerful. If he can use our earthly heritage against us, I have very little doubt he will.”⁴

Thank God that the blood of Jesus Christ redeems us from the curse of generational iniquity: “You were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from *your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers*, but with the precious blood of Christ” (1 Pet. 1:18-19 NAS, emphasis added). The very essence of the Gospel is that Jesus Christ “was pierced for our *transgressions*, he was crushed for our *iniquities*; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and *the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all*” (Isa. 53:5-6, emphasis added). It is only through the blood of Christ that any one can truly be free from the power of sin-cycles, false belief systems, and unholy bonds with other “gods” (Gal. 4:8; Col. 2:8, 11, 20; 3:9; Eph. 2:1-2; 1 Cor. 7:4-6).

Not only does God encourage us to confess and repent of all personal and generational iniquity, He also desires that people identify and repent of regional (and national) sin. For example, Moses warned Israel that they would suffer “because of their fathers’ sins But if they will confess *their* sins and the sins of *their fathers*” God would reaffirm his covenant with them (Lev. 26:38-40, emphasis added). Similarly, God told Solomon that: “if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land” (2 Chron. 7:14).

God’s instructions are obvious: If God’s people, in a corporate sense, humble themselves to seek God’s face and repent of personal and corporate sin (generational, regional, and national), God will restore their families and heal their land. “Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but

² R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 2.731.

³ Neal T. Anderson, *The Bondage Breaker* (Eugene: Harvest House, 2000), 240.

⁴ Beth Moore, *Breaking Free, Making Liberty in Christ a Reality in Life*, Workbook (Nashville: LifeWay Press, 1999), 81.

delight to show mercy. You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea” (Micah 7:18-19).

Throughout history, the Lord has sought to break generational sin-cycles by searching for someone (really *anyone*) to “stand in the gap” as a representative of the people before the Lord:

The people of the land practice extortion and commit robbery; they oppress the poor and needy and mistreat the alien, denying them justice. I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found none. So I will pour out my wrath on them and consume them with my fiery anger, bringing down on their own heads all they have done, declares the Sovereign Lord (Ezek. 22:29-30).

Again, let’s pause to consider: will just one person humbly abide in God’s presence long enough for the light of God’s truth to expose sin and “stand in the gap” as a legal representative before God so that forgiveness may be unleashed upon an entire city?

To intercede through “identificational” repentance is simply to identify with a particular corporate sin (national, regional, ethnic, religious, vocational, or family) and represent the perpetrators (or victims) by repenting of (or forgiving) that particular sin. It is important to clarify at this point that “identificational” repentance is *not* a prayer for the dead (to absolve them of personal accountability before God); nor is it “vicarious” repentance (to stand as a substitute of others). Identificational repentance seeks to release the present generation of descendants from the *consequences* of the sins of previous generations (based on 2 Chron. 7:40 and Lev. 26:40).

Is this *really* biblical? Absolutely. There are many examples of identificational repentance. Moses sought God’s forgiveness on a corporate level after Israel’s worship of the golden calf (Exod. 32:9-14; 34:8-9; Deut. 9:18-29; 10:10-11; Ps. 106:6, 23). Note particularly that Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Daniel *did not* commit the sins they confessed, but as representatives identified with and confessed the corporate sins of others:

- ❑ Isaiah repented on behalf of all the Israelites (Isa. 6:5).
- ❑ Jeremiah confessed the sins of his generation and his forefathers (Jer. 3:25; 14:7, 20).
- ❑ Daniel’s identificational repentance delivered God’s people from the demonic principalities of Persia and Greece (Dan. 9:8, 20-22; 10:2ff.).
- ❑ Ezra’s identificational repentance (Ezra 9:6-15) led to corporate repentance (10:1-4).
- ❑ Nehemiah’s identificational repentance (Neh. 1:6-9) also paved the way for corporate repentance (8:9-11; 9:1-2).

By following the example of God’s humble servants, believers can also identify with the sins of their forefathers in priestly (mediatorial) prayer (1 Pet. 2:9) in order that they may experience a greater measure of God’s grace on a personal level and release God’s mercy on a corporate level.

Many who hold a passionate vision for their city will likely be inspired to research the historical sins of the land to uncover generational iniquities that have developed into oppressive strongholds for evil forces to exploit today. The following compelling questions by George Otis, Jr. may provoke us to tackle some “spiritual mapping” of our own communities:

“Why, for example, is the island nation of Haiti the premier social and economic eyesore in the Western hemisphere? Why do the Andean nations consistently rank as global leaders in per capita homicide rates? Why has Japan remained such a thorny challenge for

Christian evangelists? Why is there so much overt demonic activity in and around the Himalayan Mountains? Why has Mesopotamia put out such a long string of tyrannical rulers?”⁵

So what would happen if believers began to do some Holy Spirit-led investigations of their cities? Would it help us to pray more specifically and more effectively? Would we begin to see some breakthroughs, or at least some movement toward a tangible transformation of our communities? What *would* happen if we zeroed in on certain spiritual bondages (i.e. “sin-cycles”) that may be hindering our neighbors from coming to faith in Christ?

If just *one city resident* earnestly devotes himself to seek the truth, repent, and present his legal appeal before God’s throne, the Lord promises to forgive that entire city and heal the land. Can one repentant person actually curb *some* of the darkness over a city long enough so as to jar open a window of opportunity for God’s people to effectually contend for the faith and proclaim the hope of Christ to their generation (2 Cor. 4:3-4; Acts 26:18; Col. 4:2-3)?

Don’t just think about it. Do some research and pray about it.

⁵ George Otis, Jr., *The Twilight Labyrinth, Why Does Spiritual Darkness Linger Where it Does?* (Grand Rapids: Chosen Books, 2000), 52. A secular worldview assumes that they are socio-political problems, but the biblical (covenant) worldview would suggest that these issues reflect a spiritual problem.