

Christians in the Public Square

Question: “In Ex. 34:6-7 and Dt. 5:9, God speaks of “visiting iniquity of the father to the third and fourth generation.” But in other passages we are assured that the children will not be punished for the iniquity of their father (Dt. 24:16; 2 Ki. 14:6).

Answer:

- God’s view of human relations includes the idea that we bear guilt for sins committed by our forefathers (see 2 Sam. 21). We find numerous examples of children suffering at least temporal judgment because of their fathers’ sins (Josh. 7:23-25; 2 Sam. 12:16-23).
 - The two passages cited speak *principally*: God does not abate in judgment wicked peoples.
- The Bible also denies that offspring are *necessarily* judged for the sins of their father. Dt. 24:16 therefore restricts parents/children from being *automatically* punished in this way. Moreover, the Bible rejects this principle as a complaint for generations who are judged for their own sin (Eze. 18:1-9).
- Repentance and pleas for mercy always are answered by God with grace and forgiveness. This is why you have members of “cursed” races in the Old Testament entering Israel (Ruth, for instance).
- Some people speak today about families having a “generational curse.” This is not helpful language. What these families have is a legacy of unbelief and sin that works evil and suffering. Members of such families can and do find salvation and blessing. Therefore, it is not God who bears the blame for generations of evil and suffering in certain families.