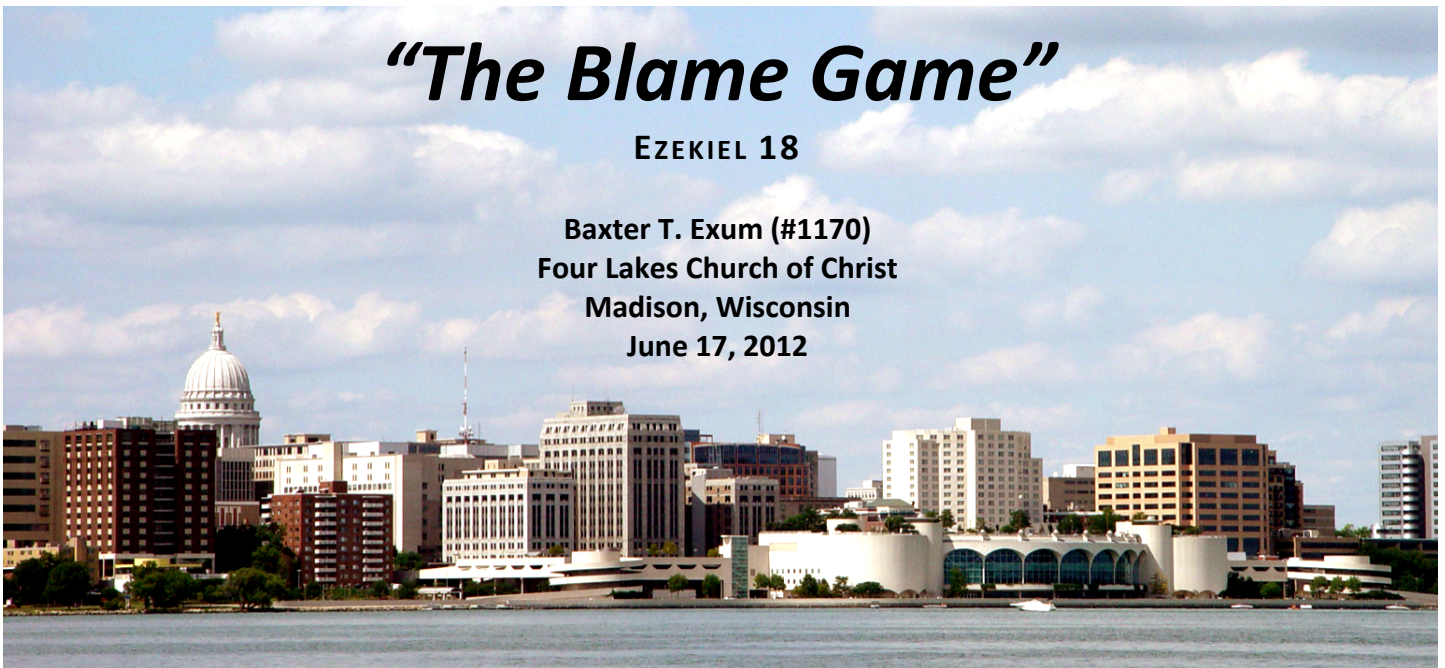


# ***“The Blame Game”***

**EZEKIEL 18**

**Baxter T. Exum (#1170)  
Four Lakes Church of Christ  
Madison, Wisconsin  
June 17, 2012**



Perhaps some of you have run across the story of a lame duck president meeting his successor in the Oval Office. They are working on the transition from one administration to the next, and on the day before the inauguration, the outgoing president presents the incoming leader with three numbered envelopes and tells him to open those envelopes in order whenever he faces a great difficulty. Well, after the new president had a pretty good honeymoon period with the press and the public, the economy took a serious downturn, and so the new president opened the first envelope. Inside Envelope #1 there was a very simple note that said, “Blame me.” And so over the next few days, the new president blamed the old president for all of the economic woes. Some time later, the new president faced a social crisis, and the crisis brought with it some very serious unrest. And so the president opened the next envelope. Inside Envelope #2 there was another very simple message, “Blame my party.” And so for the next several days, the president blamed the party of the previous administration. He turned it all political and got the two groups fighting against one another, and after a few weeks, the president was able to distance himself from that situation. And then, about a year later, the nation faced a serious foreign policy challenge, and as a last result, the president opened that final envelope, and in Envelope #3 there was also a very simple message, and the message said, “Prepare three envelopes.”

It seems that we as a society love blaming other people for what we have done – from the president all the way down to little children playing in the back yard – most of us will do everything in our power to avoid taking responsibility. In our Sunday morning Bible classes this quarter and also last quarter, we have been studying various aspects of the Babylonian Captivity, that time in Jewish history when the southern two tribes were punished for turning away from God. Based on our studies, most of us understand that the city of Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians in 586 BC, and yet we also know that there were several raids in those decades leading up to the fall of Jerusalem. In other words, it did not happen all at once, but the Jewish people were conquered in several waves. Daniel, for example, was taken in one of those earlier raids, as the Babylonians tried to dishearten the people by taking the best and the brightest of the young men. Well, on one of those raids, the Babylonians also kidnapped a number of priests, and in that number was a man by the name of Ezekiel. So, if we can imagine this, Ezekiel the priest was captured and taken to Babylon a number of years before the fall of Jerusalem. Ezekiel, then, had a unique perspective. And as a prophet, Ezekiel regularly sent messages back to those who remained in Jerusalem, warning them to repent before they too were taken into captivity. As a prophet, then, Ezekiel also ministered to the Jewish slaves in Babylon.

As Ezekiel presented God's message among the slaves in Babylon, he found that they were blaming their parents for what had happened, and that they were doing everything in their power to avoid taking responsibility for what was happening to Jerusalem and the Jewish nation. Remember: This was at the beginning of the captivity, long before the people had even started to consider taking responsibility for what they had done. Ezekiel was in the middle of it. We see something of what the prophet was up against in Ezekiel 2. In Ezekiel 2:3, God said, ***"Son of man, I am sending you to the sons of Israel, to a rebellious people who have rebelled against Me; they and their fathers have transgressed against Me to this very day. I am sending you to them who are stubborn and obstinate children, and you shall say to them, 'Thus says the Lord God.' As for them, whether they listen or not – for they are a rebellious house – they will know that a prophet has been among them."*** God went on to tell Ezekiel that he was not to fear anything that the people might do to him, but he was to speak the word of God no matter what. In fact, in the next chapter (in Ezekiel 3:8-9), God said that He would make Ezekiel's head as hard as theirs – like emery and harder than flint! And so in that passage, God gives His approval to hard-headed preachers! God basically told Ezekiel that his audience was stubborn; therefore, as the preacher, he had to be even more stubborn than they were! It was a difficult assignment, but Ezekiel took it on – preaching to a bunch of people who refused to take responsibility for the punishment that God was delivering. This morning, then, as we think about taking personal responsibility for our decisions, I would like for us to consider the words of a hard-headed stubborn preacher, words that are recorded for us in Ezekiel 18 (p. 1322).

***1 Then the word of the Lord came to me, saying, 2 "What do you mean by using this proverb concerning the land of Israel, saying, 'The fathers eat the sour grapes, but the children's teeth are set on edge'? 3 As I live," declares the Lord God, "you are surely not going to use this proverb in Israel anymore. 4 Behold, all souls are Mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is Mine. The soul who sins will die.***

***5 "But if a man is righteous and practices justice and righteousness, 6 and does not eat at the mountain shrines or lift up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, or defile his neighbor's wife or approach a woman during her menstrual period — 7 if a man does not oppress anyone, but restores to the debtor his pledge, does not commit robbery, but gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with clothing, 8 if he does not lend money on interest or take increase, if he keeps his hand from iniquity and executes true justice between man and man, 9 if he walks in My statutes and My ordinances so as to deal faithfully — he is righteous and will surely live," declares the Lord God.***

***10 "Then he may have a violent son who sheds blood and who does any of these things to a brother 11 (though he himself did not do any of these things), that is, he even eats at the mountain shrines, and defiles his neighbor's wife, 12 oppresses the poor and needy, commits robbery, does not restore a pledge, but lifts up his eyes to the idols and commits abomination, 13 he lends money on interest and takes increase; will he live? He will not live! He has committed all these abominations, he will surely be put to death; his blood will be on his own head.***

***14 "Now behold, he has a son who has observed all his father's sins which he committed, and observing does not do likewise. 15 He does not eat at the mountain shrines or lift up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, or defile his neighbor's wife, 16 or oppress anyone, or retain a pledge, or commit robbery, but he gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with clothing, 17 he keeps his hand from the poor, does not take interest or increase, but executes***

***My ordinances, and walks in My statutes; he will not die for his father's iniquity, he will surely live. 18 As for his father, because he practiced extortion, robbed his brother and did what was not good among his people, behold, he will die for his iniquity.***

***19 "Yet you say, 'Why should the son not bear the punishment for the father's iniquity?' When the son has practiced justice and righteousness and has observed all My statutes and done them, he shall surely live. 20 The person who sins will die. The son will not bear the punishment for the father's iniquity, nor will the father bear the punishment for the son's iniquity; the righteousness of the righteous will be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked will be upon himself.***

***21 "But if the wicked man turns from all his sins which he has committed and observes all My statutes and practices justice and righteousness, he shall surely live; he shall not die. 22 All his transgressions which he has committed will not be remembered against him; because of his righteousness which he has practiced, he will live. 23 Do I have any pleasure in the death of the wicked," declares the Lord God, "rather than that he should turn from his ways and live? 24 "But when a righteous man turns away from his righteousness, commits iniquity and does according to all the abominations that a wicked man does, will he live? All his righteous deeds which he has done will not be remembered for his treachery which he has committed and his sin which he has committed; for them he will die. 25 Yet you say, 'The way of the Lord is not right.' Hear now, O house of Israel! Is My way not right? Is it not your ways that are not right? 26 When a righteous man turns away from his righteousness, commits iniquity and dies because of it, for his iniquity which he has committed he will die. 27 Again, when a wicked man turns away from his wickedness which he has committed and practices justice and righteousness, he will save his life. 28 Because he considered and turned away from all his transgressions which he had committed, he shall surely live; he shall not die. 29 But the house of Israel says, 'The way of the Lord is not right.' Are My ways not right, O house of Israel? Is it not your ways that are not right?***

***30 "Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, each according to his conduct," declares the Lord God. "Repent and turn away from all your transgressions, so that iniquity may not become a stumbling block to you. 31 Cast away from you all your transgressions which you have committed and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! For why will you die, O house of Israel? 32 For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies," declares the Lord God. "Therefore, repent and live."***

As we look at this passage for the next few minutes, I would like for us to start by looking at the proverb the people were using (verses 1-4), I would like for us to just briefly consider the three case studies given (in verses 5-20), I'd like for us to notice how Ezekiel points out that change is possible (in both ways – from good to bad and bad to good), and then I would like for us to close with God's preference right there at the very end.

- I. **But first of all, let us please go back and consider the proverb (up in verses 1-4), the PROVERB that people were using to justify their continued rebellion.**

Apparently, there was an old saying going around, ***"The fathers eat the sour grapes, but the children's teeth are set on edge."*** And by saying that, the people were saying: Our fathers sinned, and now we are suffering

because of it, but we personally have done nothing wrong. We have done nothing to deserve this! And in response to that line of reasoning, in response to these people playing the blame game, God (through the prophet Ezekiel) was saying: Not so! In fact, the people were badly mistaken. They were in Babylon not because of the sins of their fathers, but they were there because of their own sins. Yes, they might have been influenced by their fathers, but they were the ones who actually deserved the punishment.

As far as I can tell, this proverb is not found anywhere in the Bible. Perhaps the closest we get to it is in the giving of the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20. God told the people not to worship idols, and then He gave the reason, ***“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 the fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.”*** But notice, the consequences would fall on ***“the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me.”*** Not just punishment for the sake of punishment, but on those who hate God. And then they apparently forgot that God would show His lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love God and keep His commandments. God, therefore, is fair and loving (even in the Old Testament), but the people had apparently taken that statement, and they had twisted it to avoid taking personal responsibility for their own actions. It was much easier to blame their parents.

So that we can have a much better idea of what this little proverb means, I went out to Copps last night and looked for some sour grapes. **\*\*PASS OUT GRAPES\*\*** I got some funny looks as I went looking for sour grapes – I guess stores don’t usually pride themselves on how sour their grapes are, but I did the best I could. Let’s not make a meal out of it here, but as we each take one of these, go ahead and eat it, and I want to ask a few questions in just a moment. And again, I realize that these are not incredibly sour. Probably the most sour thing I’ve ever eaten is a crabapple. Back when we first got married, we had a crabapple tree, and we were poor (or at least we thought we were poor), and we just hated to see all of those crabapples go to waste. So, we gathered up those apples and Keola cooked them down in a crockpot, and we thought we would make some applesauce. Let me just say: There is not enough sugar in the world to make a crockpot full of crabapples taste good! But even with the grapes, they may not really qualify as being ***“sour,”*** but the taste is definitely distinctive, and the taste has a way of sticking around. For just a moment, try to imagine a loved one who is not here with us this morning, and let me ask: As you ate that grape, do you think that person was able to taste anything? If I were to get on the phone and talk to my dad right now, what do you think he would say if I said, “How does it taste?” He would think that I had lost my mind! And in the same way, God (through the prophet Ezekiel) was saying: That’s the last I want to hear about that proverb! It doesn’t make sense! When a father eats a sour grape, that sour taste is not passed down to the child.

And yet as we look around us, not just at various presidents through the years, many people around us love blaming their situation on anyone but themselves. And this goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden. God confronted Adam about eating the forbidden fruit, and Adam said, ***“The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me from the tree, and I ate.”*** So, Adam blamed it on the woman and ultimately on God Himself. Think about that! Adam blamed the first sin on God! God then turned to the woman, and the woman said, ***“The serpent deceived me, and I ate.”*** So, apparently, everybody was at fault in the Garden of Eden, except for the two people who actually ate the fruit! Everybody was at fault except for the two people who still had that taste in their mouths!

God, then, had to remind the people (at the end of verse 4), ***“The soul who sins will die.”*** You eat the fruit, you pay the price – you are the one stuck with that sour taste in your mouth! No longer can you blame your punishment on your father, on your mother, on anybody else. And that is a basic lesson that still applies even

today. When we personally choose to do something wrong, we can't blame it on the government, we can't blame it on our parents, we can't blame it on our schools, we can't blame it on the television, we can't blame it on the internet, but there is a point where we need to step up and take responsibility for our own actions. Several days ago, a friend of mine posted a picture about the folly of some of the gun laws we see around us. The picture was of a rather obese man holding a sign that said, "This spoon made me fat." And I think we see the point he was making, because it is rather obvious (or at least it should be to most of us) that a spoon is really not capable of making us fat. It is what we choose to do with the spoon. In the same way, we cannot blame a spouse for our unfaithfulness, we cannot blame our boss for our decision to waste time at work, and we certainly cannot blame our parents for our own decisions while raising our own children.

**II. And in case there is any doubt about this, Ezekiel goes on to give several CASE STUDIES.**

I know in some of my counseling-type classes, we used a lot of case studies. We learned the basic concepts, and then we had to look at some real situations to try to apply what we had learned, and that is what Ezekiel does here. We won't spend too much time on this, but notice the three examples:

**A. First of all, we read about a righteous man (verses 5-9).**

This man followed all of the rules, he paid attention to God's law, and in verse 9, we find that he is righteous; therefore, this man will live.

**B. However, in the next section (verses 10-13), we now find that this righteous man has an evil son.**

And, in spite of the righteous man's best efforts, his son was not faithful. The son, in fact, was evil. There is a message here for those of us who were blessed to have had Godly parents: We have to follow God on our own. Just having good parents is no guarantee that we will end up being okay with God. And then there is another lesson for those of us who are parents: We can give our children an advantage by teaching them and bringing them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord, but ultimately, whether to follow God is their choice, our children are not pre-programmed little robots, and we find that this particular son chose to do some very bad things. This son, in fact, in spite of having a righteous father, was a violent, idol-worshipping, adulterer. He hated the poor and stole from his neighbors. God then says, in spite of this man's righteous father, the man himself will be put to death, and he will deserve it, "***his blood will be on his own head.***"

**C. But then we have a third case study as we are now introduced to a man who appears to be the third generation here – the son of the wicked man and the grandson of the righteous man from earlier.**

And we learn here that the grandson, in spite of observing his evil father, decides to be different and decides to be righteous. He does not worship idols, he does not commit adultery, he does not steal, he feeds the hungry and gives clothing to those who need it. And the Lord says that this son will not pay the price for his father's sin, but he will surely live. And so here we have an encouraging reminder: If you feel that you have come from an abusive family, if you have the worst dad ever, if your parents are ungodly reprobates, do not assume that you will turn out the same way. In fact, as individuals, we have the power to make our own decisions. And, unlike the people Ezekiel was preaching to here, we are not to simply blame our parents and then go about following their evil example.

And that is Ezekiel's conclusion in verse 20, ***"The person who sins will die."*** The word for ***"sin,"*** here, is a word that refers to missing the mark, almost like we might shoot an arrow at a target and miss it. And when we are the ones shooting the arrow, either missing or hitting the target is not something that someone else can do for us. If I am the one aiming and shooting, then I have no right to blame whatever happens on someone else.

**III. As we go back to the next section in Ezekiel 18, we find in verses 21-29 that IT IS POSSIBLE TO CHANGE – in fact, we can change in either direction.**

We won't go through every verse here, but just notice verse 21 – if the wicked man turns away from his sins and follows God's law, that man can be forgiven – he does not need to stay a wicked man forever. And thankfully, that's the way it continues to be under the New Covenant. The basic concept is still the same. No matter what you've done in the past, God can forgive it – sexual immorality, abortion, substance abuse, racism, whatever. If we turn from away from sin and back towards God, the Lord will forgive. That's the good news.

On the other side, though, we find in verse 24 that a righteous man can also change – just because he is righteous now does not mean that he will always be righteous. In fact, the Lord goes on to say (also in verse 24) that the righteous person's good deeds will not be remembered if that person turns back to a life of sin. I would point out that this is unlike the Islamic faith. As some of you know, I had the opportunity to speak with an Islamic imam several years ago, and he pictured their plan of salvation as being almost like a scale – at the end of your life, if your good deeds outweigh the bad deeds, then you get into heaven. But in this passage, we learn that God is a God of right now. The point, though, is that change is possible, and the change can take place in both directions – not only from bad to good, but also from good to bad.

**IV. As we come near the end of this passage, we come to God's conclusion on this whole issue, and GOD'S CONCLUSION IS THAT HE WOULD MUCH RATHER HAVE US CHOOSE LIFE INSTEAD OF DEATH.**

Since we will be judged according to our conduct, the Lord God wants us to repent. He wants us to turn away from our sins so that we avoid the punishment. As we find in verse 32, ***"...I have no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies,"*** declares the Lord God, ***"Therefore, repent and live."*** And to make that possible, we find that we are to make ourselves a new heart (verse 31). We have had several people come to Madison for heart transplants. They come from all across the nation – we had one man from Florida and another from Idaho. They get on a waiting list, and then they basically hang out at a local hotel waiting for somebody around here to die in some tragic accident, at which time their little buzzer goes off and they immediately take a cab to the VA Hospital. In a sense, there are some similarities between a transplant like that and the new heart we get as Christians. Somebody has to die; only instead of an accident, the Lord offered Himself willingly on our behalf, and because of His sacrifice, we have the opportunity of having our hearts changed. But ultimately, it is completely up to us. That sacrifice has already been made, and the Lord's conclusion here is that He would much rather have us choose life instead of death.

Ezekiel has a message for all of us here this morning, and that message is: All of us are individually accountable to God. We don't have three envelopes sitting on our desk. When it comes to sin, we cannot say, "Oh, I was born this way." We cannot say, "My dad was an alcoholic; therefore, consider me excused from being judged for anything." We cannot say, "I was sick, and nobody from church came to see me, so that is why I don't plan on ever coming back to church." Ezekiel would say, "Get over it!" Ezekiel would say, "Deal with it!" Ezekiel would say, "Grow up!" Ezekiel would say, "Don't you dare blame God or His people for your own personal

decisions.” Can you tell that you ate a grape about 20 minutes ago? I can. I still have that taste in my mouth, because I ate it – not because my mom or dad ate it, not because my children ate it, but because I ate it. I am responsible! Who is responsible for where we spend eternity? Ezekiel, the hard-headed preacher, would agree with the apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:10, ***“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.”*** The good news is: If we have sinned in the past (no matter what we have done), God allows forgiveness. He has asked us to turn away from sin, and He has asked us to be briefly immersed in water so that our sins will be forgiven. If you have any questions, please ask. But if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can come to the front as we sing this next song. Let’s stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: [fourlakeschurch@gmail.com](mailto:fourlakeschurch@gmail.com)