

Lesson 9: What needs to be fixed?

Memory Verse: From the sole of your foot to the top of your head there is no soundness — only wounds and welts and open sores, not cleansed or bandaged or soothed with oil. (Isaiah 1:6)

Some years ago a computer technician was called to fix a printer that had quit printing. The power was on and the machine pushed out paper when asked to print something. But the paper it pushed out didn't have anything printed on it. The technician checked to be sure the ribbon faced the right direction and that the paper and ribbon both went where they were supposed to go. Everything checked out, but still the printer didn't put marks on the paper. He finally gave up and left it for a more advanced technician who was set to arrive in an hour or so.

When that technician arrived the first man took him to the ailing printer. While looking at it he opened the print head with the idea of cleaning it. That's when he found a piece of plastic from the end of an old ribbon stuck across the entire print head. He removed that plastic, cleaned the sticky off the head, and had a perfectly-functioning printer.

The story illustrates how important it is to understand what the problem is before you can fix it. Until the technician knew there was a piece of plastic in the way, none of the other possible solutions he tried could do anything to make the printer work better, or even at all. So if we want to know what to do to fix the human race, we have to understand what's wrong.

We learned in our first unit that the first two humans became infected with fear and selfishness when they believed Satan's lies. When they were no longer able to trust God, believing that he wouldn't always give them everything they needed, they felt they had to provide for themselves. They thought they would die if they didn't do something to prevent it.

That fear, that need to protect self, is the problem we call sin. The evil things people do are symptoms of the disease of sin, not sin itself. Solutions to humanity's problems that try to control people's behavior, the things they do, will never solve the sin problem. Those behaviors are only the symptoms of the real problem. Fixing humanity will involve changing their very character.

In a promise to restore the Jews after they had gone into captivity in Babylon, God, through Ezekiel, made this promise:

“I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean. I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart [character] and put a new spirit in you. I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.”
(Ezekiel 36:25-27)

“Then they will know that I am the LORD.” (Ezekiel 36:38)

What's the significance of the last sentence of the chapter you just read? Notice that it uses “LORD” in all capital letters. Nearly all English Bibles use that word in all caps to indicate when the original language used the tetragrammaton, the Jews' special name for God. Recall that in their culture the name was an indication of the individual's character.

So the last words of this promise chapter say that when God has fulfilled his promise and restored the people of Judah to their own land again, they will know that he is as good and kind as his name

indicates. How do we know that's what the name means?

Then the LORD came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the LORD. And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sins of their fathers to the third and fourth generation. (Exodus 34:5-7)

We have already pointed out that sin is its own punishment, that it naturally leads to death. So why did God tell Moses that he would punish the guilty and their children? Let's examine this text in the light of another Bible passage to help us understand what God meant.

The word of the LORD came to me: "What do you people mean by quoting this proverb about the land of Israel:

"The fathers eat sour grapes,
and the children's teeth are set on edge?"

As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, you will no longer quote this proverb in Israel. For every living soul belongs to me, the father as well as the son—both alike belong to me. The soul who sins is the one who will die." (Ezekiel 18:1-4)

The passage goes on to illustrate that righteous persons will live and wicked persons will die, regardless of the status of their fathers or children. God states that he doesn't want to see people die, he would prefer for them to live.

"Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent and live!" (Ezekiel 18:31, 32)

So God does not automatically punish children for the sins of their fathers, and he doesn't want to see anyone die. How then are we to understand what he said in Exodus 34:7? God is saying that while he is loving and merciful, he doesn't stand in the way of our choices or the natural consequences of our choices. It's likely that the children of wicked people will be wicked themselves because that's all they know. They were raised to think wicked was good. So they suffer the same natural consequences their parents suffered because they live their lives in the same way.

What does that tell us about God's character? God will let things happen he doesn't want to happen in order to do what is right. In this case he lets people choose for themselves to die even though he really wants them to live. That's what faithfulness means. It means doing the right thing even when that means you lose something you want as a result. That's what God is like. And that's what the Jews would know about God when he restored them to Judah after the days of Ezekiel.

Possible thought papers:

1. Did you ever give up something you wanted in order to get something better later? How did that make you feel when you gave up, and later when you got the better?
2. Find another pair of texts where the Bible seems to contradict itself. How would you explain that they don't really disagree?
3. How can you learn to trust God? What would he need to do to win your trust?