

Consequences

It's interesting to note how, down through the centuries, people's thinking has been influenced by the belief that the things that happen to them, especially the unwelcome and unhappy things that happen to them, are in some way connected with what they have done or some sin they or their parents have committed in the past. The idea has long been around that one is the consequence of the other, or that the one is in some way retribution for the other.

There are examples of this both in the Old and New Testaments. As misfortune after misfortune befell the hapless Job, the friends who gathered around him could only explain his suffering in terms of another fault or misdemeanor from the past now being visited upon him.

Indicating just how the belief continued in New Testament times, you may remember that when Jesus came upon the man who had been born blind, the disciples asked Him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9:2). The interesting thing is that they could only account for what was a sad and tragic situation, by relating it to some instance of sin in the past. There had to be a connection, such is the implication of their question. They thought the physical defect could only be accounted for in terms of a visitation from some misdeed of the past. Their only problem was that he had been born blind, so it needed to have been not something he himself had done, but something which either of his parents, perhaps even both, had done. "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

In his Commentary on John's Gospel, Professor C.K. Barrett cites belief that antenatal sin was possible. Incredible though such belief may sound to our ears. And he shows how it was believed that when a pregnant woman worshipped in a heathen temple the foetus also committed idolatry. Incredible! But there it is. And it may well have been something like this which was in the minds of the disciples when they asked their question.

In many primitive cultures it is known that people believed that if a person carried a defect, he or she was unclean. Therefore, sadly they suffered on two counts, having to bear the burden of the handicap or defect on the one hand, and social ostracism and people's attitudes on the other. Even today, the belief in consequences of this kind is still there: this idea that the consequences of our sins and misdeeds will be or have been visited upon us in some way.

Some will say that this is precisely what the Bible teaches. And so it seems to do. And nowhere is this more plainly the case than what is said in connection with the first of the Ten Commandments. That Commandment reads, in part, "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments. (Exodus 20: 4-6)

Indeed it is not just a matter of consequences. More than that, those consequences are said to be visited from one generation to the next. Even where people are innocent they may still suffer on account of what their ancestors did.

It's no wonder, really, that the injustices of such a teaching has for long troubled people. And what is to be noticed is that whilst these particular words have been remembered and emphasised, other things said which would have at least qualified them have been overlooked and ignored. In Deuteronomy Chapter 24, verse 16, we read, "Fathers shall not be put to death for their children, nor children put to death for their fathers; each is to die for his own sin".

And this concept of individual responsibility for our evils, and of their consequences beginning and ending with the person who commits them, is taken up in Ezekiel, at the commencement of chapter 18: "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".

It is never safe or wise to take a statement or text from the Scriptures, in isolation from anything else said on the same subject, as if that one statement or text is the whole truth on the matter. People do this. Indeed, they do it often. In connection with a number of topics certain texts have been highlighted, and are remembered, as if they are all that is said about the matter. Most people remember well, for example, Matthew Chapter 7, verse 1: "Judge not, that you be not judged."

It's intriguing that though known, we don't remember nearly so well, John 7, verse 24: "Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgement". And it's only by putting the two texts side by side that you come to see the truth about judging others. Not that it is ruled out, but that it is to be exercised with caution. You run into the same thing where the dispute about faith and good works is concerned. So many, many Christians will quote Romans 3, verse 28, where Paul says, "For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law." But is this the whole picture? And the answer has to be no. The same Paul elsewhere wrote in Romans, "Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbour has fulfilled the law." And, in another place, "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but faith working through love." (Galatians 5:14). All this, it should be noted, apart from what Jesus Himself said relative to the importance of doing what we say we believe. It is usefully said again, that we only get balance and perspective, and a proper understanding, by drawing together all that is said on a topic, comparing one statement with the other, seeing how the one qualifies the other.

It would, indeed, be unjust of God to visit the consequences of the parents' misdeeds onto their children and their children's children. In fact, God doesn't visit consequences at all. "It is" wrote Swedenborg "Divine truth that the Lord is never angry, never punishes anyone, still less does evil to anyone". (*Arcana Caelestia* 3131:3). There is no question but that our thoughts and our actions do invite consequences upon ourselves, but they are not visited upon us in some act of retribution by God.

Why, then, does the Bible make it sound as if He does? And what, you must be asking, are we to make of such a clear statement - as it seems - of the consequences of sin and iniquity being visited on people from one generation to another?

First of all, let this be said. What is said in Exodus, about God and in connection with the first Commandment, is a statement adapted to the limited understanding, or comprehension of God, people had at that time. God allowed people to think of Him in this way because that was meaningful to them. It was what made God real and understandable to them. It is not the truth of the matter. It is an appearance of the truth. Just as are all those other things said in the Old Testament that God repents, that God will curse and bring disaster upon people, even that He creates evil. He doesn't. But it was meaningful to convey the impression that He could and would.

The second thing to be noted is this. There is a deeper truth enshrined in these words in Exodus which must not escape us. The "generations" referred to mean, at a deeper level, the succession and progression of states we are passing through every day, sometimes even within an hour. Our moods change. We pass from one mood to another. Evil being visited from one generation to another means the way in which an evil, once committed, inevitably poisons and affects the states of life which follow and which we pass through. You tell a lie, for example, and the effect of this lie is felt on the subsequent states and experiences we have. It can't help but do this. The effects of the lie are carried forward. It's the way it is.

So there are consequences to our behaviour. Those consequences don't come at us in terms of sicknesses, physical handicaps and tragedies. Or, at least, they very rarely do. The consequences referred to are those which affect our spirit; affect us as a person. We were talking about telling a lie a moment ago. Of course that brings consequences. Have you ever known a person who is an habitual liar or who is always exaggerating? People like that come to forget what truth and honesty is. Their minds becomes clouded over with distortions. It sounds bad, but it happens.

We can rest assured that our past misdeeds are not visited upon us in some external, bodily way. But all that we do; the things we cherish and love; do carry consequences for us, particularly at the level of our mind and spirit, and in the way we've described.

The Swedenborg Program – Number 87.

<http://www.swedenborg.com.au>