

Unfair

Sour grapes, set teeth, and the God who says “all souls are mine”

SPEAKER	Geno Hildebrandt
DATE	Sunday, May 30, 2021
PASSAGES	Ezekiel 18:1-4; Ezekiel 18:25-32; Exodus 20:4-6; Deuteronomy 24:16
MESSAGE	Begins at 0:57:00 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

We all meet circumstances that are genuinely unfair, and it is easy to slide from “life is unfair” to “God is unfair.” But in Ezekiel 18 God answers his complaining exiles: “All souls are mine.” He sees us as individuals, not as the sum of our parents’ failures – so no one is trapped by fate or victimhood, and every one of us can turn and live.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ◆ Unfair things happen through no fault of our own. The danger is letting them convince us that God himself is unfair.
- ◆ “All souls are mine” is a mercy-filled statement: God treats people as individuals, so each of us can have our own relationship with him.
- ◆ Sin does ripple through generations – an alcoholic father marks his children – but righteousness and unrighteousness are not inherited. They are decided in each person’s relationship with God.
- ◆ Israel’s law held communal solidarity and individual responsibility together; the exiles set them against each other.
- ◆ Blaming others or circumstances and giving up leaves us stuck in victimhood – already in the grave. Fatalism and “kismet” have no place in the kingdom of God.
- ◆ Never say “you’re just like your father,” or write off children from a broken home. God never says that to anyone.

- ◆ The universe is skewed toward repentance. God takes no pleasure in the death of anyone, and he can work good purposes even through bad things in broken people.

► 0:57:00

Geno – Hope’s senior leader, “a good gig, for however long it lasts” – thanked John Patrick and the band, who, he said, “were worshiping more than they were playing,” which is always his hope for those who lead worship. Then the title on the screen: *Unfair*.

Life is unfair

► 1:00:59

All of us have said it. Maybe you were the better actor but didn’t get the lead in the school play, or were injured in your senior season. Maybe you lost a business, a house or a retirement fund – as Geno’s uncle did in a downturn rooted in Wall Street greed. Maybe your home was wrecked by a parent’s adultery or another’s addiction, or you were that person’s spouse.

► 1:01:54

Or a chronic disease, a car accident, someone lost to cancer or a drunk driver – stories Geno has helped people process for years. “It’s really easy to move from the unfairness of circumstantial situations in life to believing that God himself is unfair.”

Sour grapes

► 1:03:09

Ezekiel prophesied to Jews carried off by Babylon and scattered across the fertile crescent. In chapter 18 Ezekiel answers the exiles’ complaint that God was unfair to punish them for their forefathers’ sins.

► 1:04:17

“The word of the Lord came to me: ‘What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, “The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge”? As I live, declares the Lord God, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. Behold, all souls are mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is mine: the soul who sins shall die.’”

EZEKIEL 18:1–4 ↗

► 1:05:31

The children pay for their parents – “it’s not their fault, right?” But God says “all souls are mine.” Geno had the room say the word *individual*. “This is a really critical, really important, and really mercy-filled, grace-filled statement on the part of God.” It means we can have our own relationship with him, even when circumstances speak immeasurable pain against us. “We could say, well, that wasn’t my fault. God says, well, how are you going to react to it?”

Why the exiles thought so

► 1:06:47

Their thinking was not without reason. First, it seemed written into the law, in the second commandment:

“You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.”

EXODUS 20:4–6 ↗

► 1:08:22

But notice: “of those who hate me.” God forbids idols because he is not part of creation. And “visiting iniquity” means disobedient fathers pass their ways on to their children.

► 1:08:58

A raging alcoholic father who comes home drunk and mean marks the next generation, maybe the one after. “That is not the same thing as passing on unrighteousness and therefore judgment.” Righteousness and unrighteousness are declared in personal relationship with God, individually – “from the beginning it has always been so.” The point: don’t pass on damaging ways; raise your children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

► 1:10:04

Second, covenant with God in Israel was communal as well as individual; to be put outside the congregation was one of the deepest curses. The exiles were “banging together” communal solidarity and individual responsibility “instead of folding them together as God meant them to be.” Both were facts of Hebrew life; neither was the only one.

► 1:11:48

Third, Ezekiel himself had preached, just two chapters earlier, that previous generations had sinned and the exiles were paying for it (Ezekiel 16). Sin has continuing effects on our children. Parents may see the ripple of things they wish they had done differently. “It’s a good thing to pause and just think about that.”

The good news: we are not the sum of our parents

► 1:13:03

“Our children have an opportunity to reject what we’ve passed on that is broken and twisted, and become something amazing in Christ.” Redemption turns “angry, embittered, twisted people into those who learn to receive grace and dispense grace – not perfectly. There’s nothing perfect about anyone in this room. Well, maybe if PJ were here.”

► 1:14:15

We are all broken by sin, and children make their own way into it – “I love a two-year-old saying ‘you’re not the boss of me.’ I know some forty-two-year-olds that say that.” But “God does not treat us as the sum total of our foreparents. Thank you, Jesus.” Before the God who sent his Son to take our punishment, “we all have an opportunity in redemption to change for the better and throw off the shackles of the brokenness that’s been handed to us.”

Stuck in victimhood

► 1:15:28

Otherwise fatalism wins: if the fathers’ sour grapes set our teeth on edge, it doesn’t matter how we live. “If any of us adopt the attitude that I’m a victim of my circumstances, nothing I can do will ever change me or them – you’re in a grave already.” The exiles said: we are innocent, we are being punished for them, therefore God is unfair. “That’s actually pretty compelling – if it were true.”

► 1:16:54

Geno’s father died when he was eight, and it dramatically changed his life. It would mean something only if he said, “therefore I can’t get ahead, my life is cursed.” “I had a great mom, and she made it clear to me and to the rest of my siblings that none of that was true. He just died. God was still good.”

► 1:18:03

And the exiles had not paid attention to their own law. In Deuteronomy, the second giving of the law, Moses – who also gave Exodus 20 – said:

“Fathers shall not be put to death because of their children, nor shall children be put to death because of their fathers. Each one shall be put to death for his own sin.”

DEUTERONOMY 24:16 ↗

“You’re just like your father”

► 1:20:16

Anybody heard that? “It’s not true, and it’s very deadly... a damning lie,” because it puts a person in a cage, and “there’s nothing in that statement that breathes the nature of God.” God sees the brokenness that comes from your family, “but he doesn’t say, because your father is Earl Hildebrandt, you cannot come into the kingdom of God, Geno Hildebrandt.”

► 1:21:26

Kick the can down the road: “We have no right to look at a family system – broken, alcoholic, addicted – and say those kids will never make it. Oh my gosh, never do that... Who do you think you are – more powerful than the God of heaven, who says I will rescue, all souls are mine?” “I might preach here in just a minute.”

He loves you

► 1:22:02

“The God of heaven is seeking relationship with you, not with your foreparents.” “God loves the Hildebrandts” is meaningless. “He loves you, Geno. Really, me? The God of all creation wants a relationship with me?” That is what he was taught some forty-five years ago, and it is the most comforting thing in his life.

► 1:23:11

When he is discouraged, out of his depth, or “so angry I can’t see straight,” he walks and prays – “Lord, I am in a bad place, will you help me?” – until he can say, “I am really glad that you’re my Father and I’m your child.” Our Father in heaven – ours for sure, but also mine. Then the problems don’t vanish; they just don’t matter as much, “a lot like getting the nitrous oxide at the dentist. You can feel that drill. You just don’t care.”

► 1:24:32

He accepted his own children with joy, even after he had just had to spank them – “this is my child.” “Please hear me, this may be the main point... God loves you and wants to have a deep and abiding relationship with you, parent to child.”

► 1:25:54

So blind fate has no place in the kingdom. Geno came across the word *kismet* – the invisible hand that makes things happen, so you might as well give up. “How ugly to believe that’s the nature of reality.” It is the sour-grapes proverb again: not my fault, it’s just the way life is. “That is so unlike the God of the Bible.”

“Is my way not just?”

► 1:27:03

“Yet you say, ‘The way of the Lord is not just.’ Hear now, O house of Israel: Is my way not just? Is it not your ways that are not just? When a righteous person turns away from his righteousness and does injustice, he shall die for it... Again, when a wicked person turns away from the wickedness he has committed and does what is just and right, he shall save his life. Because he considered and turned away from all the transgressions that he had committed, he shall surely live; he shall not die.”

EZEKIEL 18:25-28 ↗

► 1:28:07

“Let’s compare ways,” God says, and lists the exiles’ own sins. “The Israelites saw themselves as innocent bystanders... and Ezekiel says, yeah, you’re bystanders. You’re just not innocent.” We may suffer the consequences of an unfair world, but that is not the same as standing before God accountable for other people’s acts, “which never happens.”

► 1:29:21

“It is good news that we’re not dependent on some hand of blind fate. It is great news that we’re not judged by the brokenness of our parents.” What brings us before God is how we respond; “what matters here in this life is only what is found in our hearts.”

► 1:30:16

“Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways, declares the Lord God. Repent and turn from all your transgressions, lest iniquity be your ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed, and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord God; so turn, and live.”

EZEKIEL 18:30-32 ↗

Turn and live

► 1:31:38

“Don’t continue in injustice, don’t continue in idol worship, don’t continue in the blame game... turn and live, really live.” That is the glory of standing before God as individuals: a son of a truly broken family can be “plucked like a brand from the fire by a simple faith turning to God – help me, I want to believe.” Geno suspected there were dozens of such stories in the room.

► 1:33:10

“That’s the gospel.” Everyone, without exception, who puts their faith in the rescue Jesus accomplished on the cross is plucked from eternal death. Is it that simple? “Yes, it’s that simple, and you, Mr. Critic, Mr. Intellectual – you’re wrong and we’re right. It is simple enough for a child to grasp, and it is substantive enough to keep us to the end of our lives.”

► 1:34:37

Because righteousness is not inherited, we must teach our children that, however committed to Christ we are, they need their own relationship with Jesus.

► 1:35:24

“The universe is skewed toward repentance. If the universe is twisted in any way, it’s twisted toward repentance and away from stubbornness and rebellion, because that’s the nature of God’s heart.”

So we cannot afford to call anyone a reprobate or say “those kids don’t have a chance.”

Four conclusions

► 1:36:36

Shake off victimization. “I’m a victim” of parents, a car wreck, a chronic illness – “spit on that, stomp on it, twist your foot.” Instead: “I’m an individual before God. Times are tough; my God is bigger than the tough times.”

► 1:37:56

Delight in no one’s death. God doesn’t, so neither should we. Pray for the salvation of the wicked and mean it; encourage people far from God to turn. “We have no authority anywhere to write them off.”

► 1:38:39

The problem is our ways, not God’s unfairness. If something was done to you, “let me sit with you, I will weep with you, I will listen to you... but it’s still your life and your faith,” and you will need to stand and face it – with a community to help. We tend to minimize our own sin and maximize outside events. “That is very normal human nature,” and the Spirit can help us overcome even that.

► 1:39:53

A miracle of grace. Don’t ask, “Why do bad things happen to good people?” – the famous book whose answer is basically that God isn’t that good. Ask instead, as one author put it, “How can bad things achieve a good purpose in bad people?” God can take terrible circumstances, and broken, sinful people, and still achieve a good purpose. “Life is difficult and it’s very unfair, but our God is not unjust.”

► 1:41:48

Geno had the room stand and prayed that we would “put far away from us the idea that we are victims of our circumstances,” and see ourselves as “children of God suffering, but children of God who belong to God, and for whom the setback or the suffering or the difficulty is never the end of the story. You are the end of the story, and we are already in you.”

FOR FURTHER STUDY

SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE

- [Ezekiel 18:1–4](#)
- [Exodus 20:4–6](#)
- [Ephesians 6:4 \(KJV\)](#)
- [Ezekiel 16](#)
- [Deuteronomy 24:16](#)
- [Matthew 6:9](#)
- [Ezekiel 18:25–28](#)
- [Ezekiel 18:30–32](#)

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. What unfair circumstance in your life has most tempted you to conclude that God himself is unfair?
2. Geno distinguished between inheriting the effects of a parent's sin and inheriting guilt before God. Where do you see that distinction at work in your own family story?
3. What labels like "you're just like your father" have been spoken over you, how did they shape you, and what does "all souls are mine" say back to them?
4. Where are you tempted to minimize your own sin and maximize what others did to you? What would it look like to "turn and live" there?
5. Which of Geno's four conclusions do you most need this week – shaking off victimhood, refusing to write anyone off, owning your ways, or trusting God to bring good out of a bad thing?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Geno Hildebrandt serves as Hope Chapel's senior leader. In this message he spoke of losing his father, Earl Hildebrandt, when he was eight, and of a mother who taught him that God was still good. He has spent years listening to people work through unfair circumstances, and said he came to faith some forty-five years ago.

Watch the full message:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZsDEcrqKOJA&t=3420s>

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.