

# Character of God E5 Q+R

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## **Does God Curse Generations?**

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## Does God Curse Generations?

Jon: Welcome to this week to the BibleProject podcast. Today on the show, we are doing a mid-series question and response episode. We're talking about the character of God in this series. And with me is Tim and Carissa. Hi.

Carissa: Hey, Jon.

Tim: Hey, there. Here we are.

Jon: Here we are. We have some questions from people following along with the Character of God series, walking through these attributes that God declares Himself in a famous story in Exodus 34. So if you've been following along, awesome. If you haven't, you can start from the beginning or just jump in now with these questions.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: So let's get to it.

Tim: Let us.

Jon: This first question is from Nancy in Michigan.

Nancy: Hi, I'm Nancy from Grand Rapids, Michigan. Thank you for this excellent series. Here's my question. My son grew up in the Church but has been questioning his faith. At times he sees God as being contradictory and appearing to be emotionally abusive at times. In one of your podcasts you mentioned that Jesus is the full-orb portrait of God. If people don't see this, they are either misunderstanding God, Jesus, or both. What exactly would you say people are misunderstanding about the God of the Old Testament and Jesus of the New Testament? Thanks.

Tim: Great question.

Carissa: Yeah, I feel like this is a question that a lot of people have and a lot of people resonate with.

Tim: Yeah, yeah. I have found this—I think we've all have talked about this, all three of us at some point—that it's actually a more regular experience that I found in pastoral ministry. When people are coming to own their faith, or they're just exploring it to try and take it more seriously, and they just read the actual Bible as opposed to rely on the versions of the stories that they were given through teaching or something, there's a whole phase usually of the Bible creating all these problems for people. Actually, Jon you lived there for quite a long time.

Jon: Mm hmm.

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Tim: So this is a very common issue. The portrait of God is complex and difficult to process. I just thought you were doing a character of God series and I think Nancy and her son has experienced probably represent where a lot of us have been or are in this moment.

Jon: It's especially hard when you are reading, say, the Psalms, and you just want some real feel good, like worshipful contemplate of things, and the psalmist are talking about a really retaliatory or angry God that does at times strike you as, is this abusive? Is this gone too far? And when you pull those out, and you're confronted with those, that's a total...Yeah, I've experienced that same feeling.

Carissa: She uses the word, or her son, I guess, "emotionally abusive at times". It seems like that topic of the violence God or violent depictions of God in the Old Testament especially is really hard to deal with. I guess for me when I think about questions like this for myself or for other people, it seems really important to acknowledge that there's space to ask those questions and their space within even the Christian tradition to not know the answers to those things. Like to just recognize that a lot of people think differently about these issues.

Some people read the Old Testament and think this is an ancient document that was written by ancient authors who were accommodating or God was accommodating their culture and their style of communication or God was actually accommodating and how He acted within history. There are just a lot of different ways that we can read and interpret scripture. And I guess it's helpful for me to recognize that, that there is space within the Christian tradition to ask these kinds of questions and think about how we interpret.

Tim: Yeah, that's well said on both of those points. However, there are ways to get an angle to make some forward movement in our understanding. This is actually kind of a surprising perspective that I find keeps helping me process this. And it has to do with the composite, mosaic character of the Bible. If you take the Hebrew Bible, but then add the New Testament on, we're talking about over a millennium-long process of the collection and shaping of these texts.

So the biblical texts incorporate stories, and poems, and laws, and all kinds of stuff from all these periods of Israelite history and experience. But they have been organized together with patterns and a message and so on. That's what our whole How to Read the Bible series is about. But it does create a challenge because when I encounter like you Jon or Carissa, and we work together, and we see each other on a regular basis, and pretty much, you know, your behavior is consistent from day to day,

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and you start to build up a portrait over time of like, "Oh, here's how Carissa is. This is her character that I infer from your behavior."

Then let's say you get to know somebody long enough, and there'll be something extreme that happen, and then there'll be some new aspects of their character and like, "Whoa, wow, I didn't see that." There is something kind of analogous like that to the Bible, but it's actually more complex because it wasn't all written at one go. So the way God behaves in one story, and then the way God is in another story...He'd judge a whole city and destroy it, but then He'll forgive a murderer like Cain. And you're just like, "What's the deal?"

So what we have to do what, and what Christians have struggled to do, is in adopting the Hebrew Scriptures, putting them alongside the stories of Jesus, the writings of the apostles, we have this huge project of synthesis that lay before us of how to create a mosaic portrait of God's character out of all of these pieces from different times and places. I think that's essentially the challenge is finding the continuity. So what we're emphasizing in this series is that the Yahweh of the Hebrew Bible is actually a lot more generous, gracious, and compassionate than most people tend to think.

What we're not focusing on, but which is true, is that Jesus is actually a lot more aggressive, and intense, and judgmental than people often make Him out to be. He certainly didn't get crucified for telling people to "love your neighbor". He got crucified for critiquing publicly the religious and political authorities of his day. And He was very intense with them and said they were going to be destroyed. So I think part of it is we also need to learn how to augment this Old Testament is the angry God, New Testament is the loving Jesus. Those characters don't do justice to either. Those are the two factors that have been helpful for me as I go in to think about individual texts.

Carissa: I think how we're doing these word studies really brings that out too. Because in each one, compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in *chesed*, and faithfulness, we're talking about those words through the whole Hebrew Bible, and then how those things come to film it in Jesus. So I think this word study series in particular really highlights the character of God in Old Testament and the character of Jesus.

Tim: Yeah, that's right. I do think part of what it means to be a Christian is to read the Old and New Testaments together as a unity. But that doesn't mean they're uniform in all their depictions of God. That's what I was talking about a few minutes ago. There are mosaic that comes from a lot of different places and times. So the goal is to create an overall synthesis

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and read each individual story in light of that larger synthesis that really culminates in Jesus. So it's tricky.

It's learning to let that bigger picture inform how I read individual stories where God might behave in ways that don't seem to fit with Jesus. But then what I find is, over time, there are fewer and fewer of those stories. There are still some, for me, at least, stories about what God does that are harder to fit.

Jon: When you read the Psalms and you come across those intense, even just Psalm 1, let's say, it's really beautiful, but there's a couple of things in there about...

Tim: About the wicked not standing in the judgment.

Jon: Maybe I'm thinking of Psalm 2 even.

Tim: Terrifying the kings in His anger?

Jon: Yeah. If you could put yourself back in a place where your enemies surrounding you, or are real life and death threat, you can have some more empathy for that being kind of this, "Oh, cool. That's a refreshing thing to hear almost." But from a modern perspective, it just comes across as just...

Tim: But it depends on whose modern perspective. If my social location is among an ethnic group that hasn't got to cash in on the benefits of the modern world, usually these are people groups on whose backs the modern world was built through slavery or some kind of exploitation, then the portrait of God as the vindicator of the oppressed, it's not...what I'm saying is it's not just an ancient idea that God is the vindicator of the oppressed and that He deals harshly with violent, oppressive nations and rulers. That is still good news and a real hope to a lot of people right now today in the city that I'm living in. For example, Psalm 137, we sit by the rivers of Babylon and weep.

Carissa: Yeah, right.

Tim: It begins with the Babylonian oppressors demanding that their new slaves sing them their traditional folk songs. They demand the Israelites for singing them the prey songs that used to be sung in the temple that the Babylonians destroyed. And what it ends with is calling a curse down on Babylon and Edom, that their children be dashed on the rocks.

Carissa: Yeah, it's brutal.

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Tim: It is. But also it's an honest prayer coming from people whose babies were just dashed on the rocks by their oppressors. I think what you just said earlier about the violence of God in the Bible also applies to this. There's space within the biblical tradition itself for God's people to cry out. And none of these poets actually did these things, other people's babies, they're just saying what they feel and what they wish God would do. To me that's amazing that the Bible is endorsing that we bring all of our emotional reactions before Him and pour them out before Him in Prayer.

That's a good example of where something that might to some people seem really off-putting. But I think if you really begin to ponder who's writing this in the Bible and why, usually it takes me back to school, and I get to eat some humble pie.

Jon: Well, Nancy's specific question was, what do you say to people who misunderstand the God of the Old Testament or Jesus New Testament? What I heard you say, Tim was that a surprising thing for most people is that the God of the Old Testament is much more gracious and compassionate than He gets credit for. And Jesus in the gospels could come across as a little more cantankerous and...

Tim: Intense.

Jon: ...intense.

Tim: Even judgmental.

Jon: ...and even judgmental than He has credit for.

Tim: Sorry, judgmental not with it's...that has a negative connotation in English. But judgmental in terms of critiquing and casting and giving judgment on oppressive rulers of His day.

Carissa: Right. He got angry at the oppressive rulers, especially the religious oppressors.

Jon: That's right.

Tim: These are aspects about the God of the Old Testament and of Jesus that usually aren't being considered when people create a divide between the depiction of God in the Old and New Testament.

Jon: What's one good practical next step for someone who really is hung up with their experience with the God of the Bible as being emotionally abusive? If they have some scars, and it might be from the way people

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have used scripture, and might be from their experience of Scripture, what would you say? What's one good thing to do?

Carissa: Such a good question.

Tim: Yeah, it is. Something that I recommended as a pastor for lots of people, especially when people were new to the Bible, is just hang out in the Gospels. Just read the Bible for a while as if all you have is the four Gospels. After a long, you'll realize that you need the whole Bible to understand the Jesus portrayed in these four stories, but Jesus' character, even with His intensity, the amazing character that has been compelling to people all over the planet for 2000 years just shines, and I think forces you to go back into the first three-quarters of your Bible then and say, if this whole section of the Bible is leading up to the person that I've been thinking and reading a lot about in the four Gospel accounts, then it just changes. It just changes how you read the Old Testament.

Then find some good teachers, books, videos, or resources to help guide you through the Old Testament. Because a big part of it too is the culture gap between us and the world of the Hebrew Bible where the depictions of God make a lot more sense in light of the cultural context.

Carissa: Yeah, yeah. And that's what Jon said reading with empathy can help a lot. So trying to get into that world. Reading the whole story and asking how each part...Like maybe if there's a part that's really hard to deal with, asking how that that literary or that smaller story fits into the overarching story instead of trying to just see the details of that text, which would be important. Trying to see the overarching message of the story, I think that's helpful. Recognizing that God is complex, like you said. This is kind of more human-centered approach, but dealing with the places that our picture of God comes from.

Tim: Oh, good.

Carissa: When we come to the Bible, we have all these assumptions about what God is like from the get-go, and some of those things are healthy and some aren't. Some of us have a hard time dealing with anger or angry depictions. Maybe that's a really big one in our culture. So trying to figure those things out in ourselves too, I think is helpful.

Tim: That's good. No, let's go see a therapist.

Carissa: Yeah, exactly. I think it's a good idea.

Tim: It might help you understand maybe some of the baggage that you're bringing to the Bible.

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Carissa: Exactly.

Jon: We're going to do two questions that both relate to this idea of sins of the fathers. For context, in Exodus 34:6-7, what we've been going through, the second part of that, verse 7, God is the forgiver of iniquity, but He's also the bringer of iniquity. And when He brings iniquity, it says, He brings it to the third and fourth generation.

Tim: I'll just quote it real quick.

Jon: Sure.

Tim: "He keeps loyal love for thousands by forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin, yet He won't declare innocent the guilty one. He will visit the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and upon their children's children to the third and the fourth generations." That's the line we're talking about.

Jon: Yeah. We talked about this and you brought to our attention that this isn't about punishing the next generation for something they haven't done. But it is about holding accountable every generation for the same covenant. That still span out a few questions. So let's listen to both of these ones from John in California and one is from Trinette in Louisiana.

John: Hey guys, this is John from Long Beach. I really like the discussion you guys were having about Exodus 34:6-7, and immediately it made me think of Ezekiel 18, when God talks about how the sins of the father will not be held against the son and the sins of the son will not be held against the father. And it goes on to say other things in relationship to that. I wanted to see how you relate the passage in Ezekiel back to Exodus and if there's any connection there? Thanks.

Trinette: Hi, my name is Trinette Armstead. I'm from New Orleans, Louisiana. My question is, in John 9, when Jesus and the disciples encounter a man blind from birth, the disciples ask Jesus, "Who sinned, this man or His parents?" Is this a reference to Exodus 34:7 and the idea of visiting the iniquities of the father on the son? And can this verse be traced to and be the foundation of the idea of generational curses? Love what you guys do? Thank you.

Carissa: What's really cool about both of these questions is that they both are people who are recognizing patterns in Scripture are looking to find repetitions. I thought that was really cool.

Tim: Yeah, totally. These are both later biblical passages that address the very topic that raised in Exodus 34:7. Goldstar. Double high five, Johnny and Trinette.



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Maybe first to summarize what we talked about or what I remember us talking about the three of us in our first conversation about it was, one, Exodus 3:7, this line about God visiting the iniquities of the fathers and the children, this is not the first time that that line appears. That's actually a second restatement of something that God said in the Ten Commandments. The more I thought about that, the more I realized how significant that is, because it's kind of like uploading again, but assuming you remember the first statement of it.

I'm just going to read it again. It's Exodus 20:5-6. But this is the first statement of this idea, and it clarifies in a big way, the questions that are often raised of the restatement of Exodus 34:7. So he's saying, "Don't make any idols." This is verse 4 of Exodus 20. Verse 5, "Don't worship those idols or serve them. I, Yahweh God, I'm a passionate God, visiting the iniquities of the fathers on the children on the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing loyal love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commands." So just the main difference, you can hear the difference, is that what it's saying is that these third and fourth generations, it's talking about a generation where regeneration is perpetuating the idolatry of their ancestors. And contrast the thousands of generations are the enduring generations of which everyone loves me and keeps my commands.

In other words, your summary, what you just said a moment ago, Jon, our interpretation, just because we think that that's the right thing to say, it is actually what these statements mean the first time they appear. That's the first statement to make. Well, it's just a reality that if all somebody knows is the wording of these from Exodus 34, that you're going to miss an important part of what is being said here.

Carissa: That clarifies a lot. Because you're saying that actually, it's defined right here in the text that God's response is based on that person or that individual or that individual generation's sin. It's not something that He's holding against future generations.

Tim: Correct.

Jon: The third and fourth is interesting. We talked about the comparison between a little number of holding accountable for each generation that repeats the sin. Stated in the Ten Commandments is hating God and then thousands being the comparison. You also told us how the third and the fourth is a Hebrew idiom meaning "however many needed."

Tim: Yeah.

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Jon: And that was really interesting. And then you also mentioned that third and fourth has another kind of embedded meaning by the time you get here.

Tim: Totally. Yes. Actually, since we've had our conversation, whenever that was back in April, I've thought about this more, and I think it's actually really, really significant. This is found in the second book of the Torah, Exodus, which means in theory, you've already read...if you're the ideal Psalm 1 meditator, you're reading through the TaNaK multiple times of your life, you've already encountered the book of Genesis. The Genesis scroll.

Jon: The first book...

Jon: Exodus being second?

Tim: Exodus being second. This multiage generational repetition of the sins of the ancestors is what the whole book of Genesis is about, especially recounting three, even four generations. But for example—we've talked about this before—the way that the Cain and Abel story, the decision before Cain, the wording of that story is all picking up...

Jon: This is the second generation of humanity?

Tim: It's the second generation... is all picking up language of Adam and Eve's temptation and failure in Genesis 3.

Jon: So they repeat the sins of their father.

Tim: He's repeating the sins of his ancestors. Even though he's not eating from a tree, he's killing his brother. But the narrative about Cain is worded in a way to show that it's a repetition. And then Cain has multiple generations of sons, and then he has a son, who's the seventh generation from Adam, a guy named Lamech, and he is ten times worse of a murderer than his ancestor Cain. So the Genesis narrative is already telling you that humans are actually pretty predictable in how they fail. That's one. Actually, the main drama of Genesis is Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and his 12 Sons.

Jon: Yeah. So Abraham and his three generations after him?

Tim: Exactly. For thee, even for four. It's the fourth generation. So Abraham gives his wife away two times to save his neck. There's a narrative about Isaac doing the same thing. Jacob deceives his brother and father with this deceptive cloak from the skin of a goat, and he makes a fake meal and brings it to his dad. Jacob sons deceive him by selling a brother as a

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slave and bringing a deceptive cloak dipped in the blood of a goat to deceive their father.

Jon: About his favorite son being dead.

Tim: About his favorite son being dead. So the whole point is that Genesis is actually...I think it's saying both things. The message of Genesis and the message of Exodus 34:7 is saying, one, each generation is truly accountable before God for its own choices. He will deal with each generation and adjust in right way. But it's also saying the narrative argument of Genesis is saying the apple doesn't fall far. Each generation almost certainly in some way will replay or recycle some of the sins of their ancestors. So in a way, it is what my parents' failures do in some way set me up to fail in a way that's kind of similar to them, but never identical.

Carissa: Trinette also asked about John 9, when the disciples and Jesus encountered this man who's blind from birth, and the disciples asked Jesus who sinned this man or his parents. So they're asking a question assuming that sin caused this man's blindness, but they want to know if it's this person sin or his parents' sin, which kind of relates to what we're talking about in Exodus 34. So Trinette's question is whether this verse can be traced back to Exodus 34.

Tim: In other words, the assumption that disciples have is if somebody is blind or in some kind of bad situation in life...

Carissa: Yeah, suffering in any way.

Tim: Suffering in any way...it's either because they wronged God or neighbor in some way, or their parents did. So certainly the assumption under that question is based on the idea of children's suffering. But in this case, it would fit into that category of suffering innocently because of the sins of their ancestors. I think Jesus disagrees with that. He says, "No, that's not the explanation." That also disagrees with what we are saying is one of the main points of Exodus 34:6-7.

Jon: So the disciples asking that question, where did they get that idea for this question?

Tim: Clearly it's in the air.

Carissa: You know what it reminded me of is the retribution principle in Proverbs, well, throughout other places too in the Torah, but especially in Proverbs that if you do good, you'll be rewarded. If you are wicked, you'll be punished. Just that idea of there's a predictability to life and this is how God acts justly or this is wisdom—this is living wisely. And then how Job

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contrast with that perspective, the book of Job, by showing that actually suffering comes on people even if they are super righteous, and you can't use that principle to explain their suffering. To me, it seems like this John 9 passage is addressing that kind of idea that maybe was in the air even because of that sort of wisdom, which is wisdom. It's just not the only way of viewing the world.

Tim: Yeah, that's right. There may be times where parents do something that's really, really dumb, and it sets their children up for...

Jon: Yeah, it makes a lot of sense.

Tim: Totally.

Jon: If your parents made some really bad mistakes, you're going to pay for it.

Tim: That's right. They will pay for it, and likely their family in the future will pay for it too. So there is an inner logic to it. But that's different than misunderstanding...I feel like the most frequent misunderstanding of Exodus 34:7 is like an innocent next generation that shouldn't have to be held responsible, but God's going to hold them responsible anyway.

Jon: "I'm so angry what your parents did, I'm going to keep punishing you."

Tim: Yeah. We're agreeing that we don't think that is faithful or sensible.

Jon: So wherever the disciples got this, it wasn't from meditating on...

Carissa: Exodus 34.

Tim: Yeah, not on that level. However, what I was just trying to bring up with the multi-generational sin repetitions of the generations in Genesis is saying there are ways that sins of parents can be experienced by their children. But it's not as if the children are innocent or exempt. They also end up being contributors to this cascade of generational sin.

Carissa: Although sometimes they don't. Like in this next question from Thomas, I think he gives us a good example of a generation suffering when they are innocent because of the parents' sins.

Tim: Let's listen to Thomas' question and take that on board.

Thomas: My name is Thomas from Auburn, Washington. When you explained the latter half of God's announcement about himself in Exodus 34, you made it seem like God will visit the iniquity on each generation for their own sins and failures, but this has not been my experience. My biological grandfather was an alcoholic who left his family when my father was very

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young. The ripple effects of his sins have been felt by my father, my siblings and I, and by my own children. This is how I've always understood these verses; my sin will bring suffering to those who come after me. Is there anything to this concept, or am I way off?

Tim: Thank you for sharing, Thomas. What a vivid personal example. I think clearly your own experience bears out a really common pattern in human families about later generation suffering. I think what we're after is not just this suffering or pain that grandchildren might experience, for example, for something their grandfather did. But Exodus 34:7 is talking about God's role in that process.

Jon: Or He visit the iniquity.

Carissa: That's interesting.

Tim: Yeah. I think it clearly is true in human experience and it's what the biblical narratives are trying to show by so many narratives following generations, repeat the sins of their ancestors. And in a way, that's also saying that they are suffering from the sins of their ancestors if they repeat them. Yeah, that's the part of suffering.

Jon: It's easier to repeat the sins of your fathers than other sins.

Carissa: Totally.

Tim: Absolutely.

Carissa: That's how you learn how to live in the world—from your parents: What love is like, what family relationships are like. Maybe one challenge here is that there's a really complex reality in human experience about the history of families, and the ricochet of act and consequence, the chain of act and consequence throughout multiple generations. That's such a complex reality. Naturally, the biblical story speaks to that. What's highlighted in Exodus 34:6-7 is about what is God's role? Or how does God work with all of that?

Jon: Especially in light of Him wanting to have a covenant relationship with humanity.

Tim: Correct. That's right. The idea is that God will be just in how He treats every generation, though, when multiple generations keep repeating, then I think that's part of what's reflected in this phrase, visiting the iniquity. And remember, we actually have a video on the word "iniquity." But the word iniquity and Hebrew can refer to both the act, the failure, and the consequences

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Jon: It really isn't true in English.

Tim: It's not true in English.

Carissa: What's the significance of that? It's that this is a very logical consequence for an action. So like somebody commits avon (iniquity) and then their iniquity is just visited back on them. Kind of like if I tell Serena, my daughter, "Hey, if you climb up that thing, you could fall and get hurt." And then she does and then she gets her. Her iniquity is being visited upon her in that moment.

Jon: In that fall.

Tim: The act has created its own consequence. And the Hebrew word iniquity or avon capture both of those. I just keep thinking the way that the Joseph story, the story of Joseph and his brothers culminates, actually, Abraham's sins, Isaac's sins, and Jacob's sins, it's making this point.

Jon: Three generations.

Tim: Three generations...

Jon: They get to the fourth...

Tim: They get to the fourth and it's like an explosion of all of the sins of the ancestors in one generation. But it ends with God using the brothers evil. That's the culminating line of Genesis. Joseph speaking to his brothers, "Y'all planned evil (ra) and in response to your planning evil, God planned tov. He planned good." It doesn't mean that the brothers are innocent. It's not as though God hijacked my brain and made me sin. The book of Genesis is very much exploring as its main point the same thing that these verses are about.

Jon: Yeah, it's interesting this three and third and fourth generation as it pertains to Genesis, as a commentary on Genesis even, makes that fourth generation idea pop even more, in that God could have just continued to be like, "If you guys are going to keep going this way, it's going to get gnarly and gnarly for you." But on that fourth generation, what this accumulation of ra, God turns into something good. So as a commentary on that it's kind of beautiful to see God saying, "I'm going to hold you accountable to the third and even the fourth. But for those who turn to Me, there's thousands of generations. I don't have a limit."

Tim: Yeah, that's right.

Jon: It's almost putting a limiter a little bit on His own sense of like, "How long am I going to let this go on before I intervene."

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Tim: And key to the Genesis story is that Joseph is the most consistently righteous person in the whole book.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: He seems to build a little bit of a punk when he has this dream.

Jon: When he was a kid?

Tim: But after that, he consistently does right by God and others. And God honors that by elevating him to become...The way who Joseph is, how his story fits in, fits into the Messianic strategy of the book of Genesis, which is to say, if humanity has a righteous representative, a Joseph-like figure, then all of a sudden the chain, a cycling generational sin can be reversed and redeemed. So these verses in Exodus 34 also aren't the final word. They're a part of creating the narrative tension that keeps driving you forward to look for the Messiah, and to look for that righteous representative who will love God and keep His commandments.

Carissa: To summarize this question about the sin of a father affecting the children and their children, what it seems like the biblical story is saying is that God is not the one who punishes. God doesn't bring punishment on children for the father's sins, but that certainly children experience the consequences of the actions of their family. And we see that in our world easily. When there's a family member that's addicted or abusive or anything like that affects the children and their children ongoing. But what we're saying is that we don't see that in the text as God's punishment.

Tim: Correct.

Carissa: That it's a consequence and that God wants people to find refuge in Him and turn to Him in that.

Tim: Yeah. I think it would be off track...and some traditions in the Christian tradition have gone this direction talk about generational curses. And what they do is equate that generational repetition of suffering with God's judgment as though it's a curse of sorts. And it certainly is the natural outworking of God handing a family over to the consequences of its decisions. I just think calling it the generational curse, we're not using the language of the Bible at that point, we're creating some new concept that I don't think is helpful. Because God's response to any of these generations is to want to redeem it based on the behavior and choices of that generation.

Jon: And not this sense of "you guys are screwed already."

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Tim: Totally. Yeah.

Jon: "Your parents..." Yeah.

Tim: "Your parents determined..." I know this has been a long discussion, but this is the complex set of verses. In the earlier question Johnny brought up, Ezekiel 18, and we didn't talk about it, but actually is a super important commentary on this whole theme in the Bible. I just noticed something really cool that I think will help us.

Jon: Yeah, sure.

Tim: So Ezekiel 18 fits into a whole section of Ezekiel that we don't have time to talk about. It's an oracle that begins by God bringing up to Ezekiel this saying. It's a proverb, a little analogy that's floating around Israel. The saying of the proverb is "the father's eat sour grapes, but the children's teeth are—and there's different translations—are set on edge or are doled or blunted."

Jon: I don't even know what that means.

Tim: Have you ever eaten something that's super starchy, and makes your teeth feel sticky like they're grinding on each other?

Jon: Mm hmm.

Tim: That's it.

Jon: Okay.

Carissa: That's a horrible feeling to imagine. It's like nails on a chalkboard, but it's your teeth.

Tim: Yeah, especially in a culture where winemaking was really common, this is a common experience people have. Ooh, bad grapes, bad one wine did that thing to your teeth. So the logic of the proverb is the fathers, the parents do something but it's the children who experienced the direct consequences.

What he goes on to say is, God goes on to say, "Nope, that's not how I deal with Israel." And this is all set in exile. This is exiles sitting in exile saying this proverb. The implication being, "Why am I sitting here in Babylon? Well, my parents were the idolaters. We're the righteous Daniels who just now we're sufferings for our parents' sin." So God response is, "No, actually, I deal with each individual generation on its own." So what He goes on to paint is a story of three generations of a righteous grandfather, a really violent son...



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Jon: Who becomes the father.

Tim: ...who becomes a father of a really righteous grandson.

Jon: So it's like the unrighteous sandwich with righteous bread.

Jon: Totally.

Carissa: Put a sour grape in the middle.

Tim: Yeah, the sour grapes in the middle. What he goes on to say is that this vertical chain of guilt is not a thing in God's evaluation. He evaluates each generation by its own merits. In essence, what we're saying is, that's exactly what Exodus 34:6-7 in this context is, and Genesis is saying as well. But notice it's about three generations. What he then goes on to do is paint a story of how also there's no horizontal transfer of merit.

Jon: Which is really interesting.

Tim: So let's say...this is starting down in...

Carissa: Is it "if the wicked man turns?"

Tim: Yes.

Carissa: 21

Tim: So starting in verse 21, he just talks about not even generations in terms of the life of one person. Let's say we have a really bad guy, but then he becomes a really good guy. God won't punish the redeemed guy for the stuff you did before. And then vice versa. Let's say you have a righteous guy who does bad. Then he's not going to be vindicated before God because of the stuff he did righteous long time ago. So it's really exploring this idea.

Carissa: It's cool.

Tim: It is. It all begins with a parable about parents failing when it comes to a vineyard.

Jon: While the children face the consequence.

Tim: While the children face the consequence. Think through. A parent failing in a garden vineyard with the children...

Carissa: Adam and Eve, Noah.

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Tim: Specifically, it's merging the Adam and Eve failure replayed by Cain with Noah's failure that's connected to wine. But then his son is the one who wronged him, Ham. But then it's Ham's descendants, the Canaanites who end up replaying the sin of Ham but even more so.

Carissa: Yeah. Or Lot and his daughters—his daughters taking advantage of him.

Tim: Yeah. In other words, this little proverb is itself worded in such a way as to summarize all these generational failures passed on through the book of Genesis. There's a Jewish scholar who calls the steam in the Bible, He calls it the karmic ricochet of the parents' failure in the book of Genesis. I think that's such a good summary.

Carissa: That is cool.

Jon: Does it elevate to be a theme? The cosmic ricochet.

Carissa: Wait, did you say cosmic or karmic?

Tim: Karmic.

Jon: Karmic.

Tim: He called it the karmic ricochet. Borrowing from karma. Anyway.

Carissa: I mean, it's encouraging to me when I hear you talk about that, because it means that at no point should I ever be thinking, "I'm still being punished for something I did before," or "Maybe I'm experiencing this," or "Maybe God's upset with me for this thing that I did a long time ago." That's a horizontal freedom from guilt that you're talking about.

Tim: Yeah, that's right.

Carissa: Or "Maybe I'm being punished for my parents' sins. Maybe God was just really upset with them." If we ever catch ourselves thinking that way, it's like, that's not what the Bible says.

Tim: But remember that's different than experiencing the consequences.

Carissa: Exactly.

Jon: Right.

Tim: Am I experiencing the consequences?

Jon: But it's not a form of punishment.

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Tim: But it's not a form of divine punishment. At least that's what these texts...

Carissa: So I guess the difference there is that is all about God's disposition in those moments. So it's all about where God is in those moments. Is He punishing? Or is He saying, "Hey, I'm here in this consequence, in the suffering that you're suffering."

Tim: Suffering doesn't always equal divine punishment, and prosperity doesn't always equal divine reward. Welcome to the book of Job. It's the whole message of the book of Job. It's interesting when just one verse raises a question, and all sudden you realize it's like one of the main themes in the whole Bible.

Carissa: Yeah, that's cool.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: I feel like this episode is over.

Jon: It seems like, at least from a couple of the questions we got, that Exodus 34 has been used as a proof text to facilitate this idea that God will judge kids for the sins of their fathers. Because it isn't intuitive thing. It was to the disciples when they're talking with Jesus about the blind man. And it's the sense of "Am I getting punished for something my dad did or his dad did?" It's intuitive because we are facing the consequences.

Tim: Correct. Every generation.

Jon: Every generation. And you look at just a biblical narrative, and these sins do seem to escalate from one generation X and repeat. But in spite of all that, what we see reading this verse in context of Ezekiel, in context of the Ten Commandments, which came before it, is that God isn't hovering around trying to just punish people for what their parents did. He seems to be hovering around, like in Genesis 1, waiting to bring order to chaos when people turn back. That's His...I like how you said "His predisposition". That's great.

We've done almost an hour, I think. But I think we have time to maybe just dip in a little bit to...there was some questions around Moses as an intercessor. Let's talk about a question from Chris in England talking about Moses.

Chris: Hi, Tim, Jon, and Carissa. This is Chris from Winchester, England. When Moses was reminding God of His character because God wanted to leave the Israelites, do you think there is any indication that this was God's plan all along? Was he playing hard to draw a response of compassion out

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of Moses, maybe as a test to see if Moses would consider God's character and plead for the Israelites rather than to seek his own legacy? Thank you for all you do. I love listening along with your conversations.

Jon: Thanks for listening along, Chris.

Tim: Yeah, Chris, it's an honor to have you on the journey. So what you're expressing, Chris is what many people feel. It's out of an experience of turmoil that a lot of people have when pondering God's character, and in this intercession narrative. So God says He wants to do one thing, destroy the people, and Moses steps in. We talked about his five acts of intercession. Moses lays down his own life. God says, "No thanks, it won't be necessary." And then in three more times, Moses draws God back in to covenant partnership, and to go along with the people.

So the question is, how seriously do I take God's words and purposes that seem to turn a corner precisely because of Moses? Was this God teaching Moses something? This is what you're pondering Chris, or is there a different way to think about this all together? Really this raises the ultimate questions about the divine purpose, God's eternal purpose in relation to finite humans and their purposes.

Carissa: And how God relates to humans and also more broadly what the purpose of this story is in its spot.

Tim: That's right.

Carissa: So is the purpose of the story to show an example of testing? It could be multi-purpose.

Tim: Yeah, that's right.

Carissa: Or is it something else?

Tim: Certainly, this is a development in Moses has character in a positive direction, that he will intercede on behalf of rebellious people, even laying down his own life for people who don't deserve it. So certainly, it's a story about exalting Moses in this moment as being a righteous example.

Jon: Which is what we've been looking for is this righteous intercessor.

Tim: That's totally right. However, whether God's ultimate purpose was to prove Moses' character, I have a harder time getting there. Not that you are there, Chris. Seems like you're just pondering it as a possible explanation. Ask me in two years, I might have a different way of thinking about it. At this moment, I would refrain men say it's less about God teaching Moses something, and it's more about the narrator trying to

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teach the reader something about how God relates to people. Namely, that God truly wants to partner with humans, and that God has made his own purpose vulnerable to human action.

I think that's the nature of God, as revealed in this story is that at least in interacting with creation, He self-limits, to make his purposes truly relational. That's actually dangerous. Because humans in the story...

Jon: It's dangerous for God?

Carissa: Yeah.

Tim: Well, it's dangerous for humans.

Carissa: Or both.

Tim: Or both. I don't know if it's dangerous for God.

Carissa: Or for His purposes.

Tim: Yeah. Certainly, God makes His own purpose vulnerable. But it makes humans extremely vulnerable because we keep failing. And it puts us in danger. But that's the whole point of this narrative, I think, is to drive that point home about the need for the ultimate righteous intercessor. I think that's ultimately one of the main themes of this narrative.

Jon: What is it communicating to the reader?

Tim: What is it communicating to the reader as opposed to what is God communicating to Moses?

Jon: Or what was God doing with Moses? Well, if you were going to think about Moses and God, and you kind of...it's almost like game theory a little bit, in that trying to see what God's motives were at that moment. Because if it was just simply a test, then, in a way, Moses is calling God's bluff because God wasn't going to walk away from his covenant in the first place.

Tim: That's right. On that interpretation?

Jon: On that interpretation.

Tim: Correct.

Jon: So I think there's maybe a sense of wanting to smooth out the narrative a little bit by saying, well, maybe it was just a test. What I hear you saying is we can't really go and infer that or you don't feel comfortable doing that. But what we can do is sit in the logic of the whole narrative

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getting to this point, and God's kind of this relentless pursuit of partnering with humanity, and then letting this moment speak to us, and let us know how in this with us God is that He would be influenced by Moses.

Tim: Again, I think this is part of what it means to read the Hebrew Bible the way Jesus read it, as messianic wisdom literature. These stories are trying to show the need for someone to come and do the thing that no one in the story seems to be able to do.

Jon: But that Moses does really well at this moment.

Tim: Exactly. But then even he fails, eventually, creating the need for someone later. So while it is telling me about God's relationship to humans in general, it's actually even more specifically, painting a story about the divine human relationship that creates a problem that has to get solved, and that Jesus claims to be resolving Himself.

So when I read the story, as a follower of that Jesus, I think what I ought to be doing is saying, "I am so glad Jesus is interceding for me right now in this moment, and that God has met the need of that human partner by becoming that human partner in the person of Jesus." I think that's where Christian's imagination is supposed to go in reading the story. Because Jesus is a human...

Jon: Great high priest who's interceding on our behalf.

Tim: ...who interceded, and has been for 2000 years now. I think that's part of what it means to be a Christian is to believe that.

Jon: To believe that—that Jesus stands in this position, like Moses was, of saying, "Take my life instead and be true to your commitment."

Tim: Yeah. I think where this story has ongoing truths to teach me it's about how God truly honors the decisions and intercession and prayers of His own people. Because if I am a Christian, at least I think my own prayer life is one of the most difficult parts of being a Christian for me is understanding prayer. But stories like this I think are actually meant to really bolster our confidence and boldness to say that we are invited, like Moses, and because of Jesus to come before God and intercede but not always knowing or being guaranteed of what those results might be.

Carissa: So when we come to the story, we're asking the question, what the purpose of the story is. One of the purposes is to show what God is like. That He's responsive to humans, and that He partners with humans, that He invites humans to intercede. And the story also is purpose toward foreshadowing this future person who will be an intercessor for the many.

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So the one righteous person who intercedes for the many. It's kind of a two-fold purpose.

And back to that question of whether God is genuine in this moment or not, it seems in the narrative that He's portrayed as really hurt, really upset. His emotions are described in a way that seems like He's being portrayed as genuine in His response. And it is true intercessory act of Moses that changes His mind.

Tim: Yeah. So to take this up into a whole biblical theology then is to say that same tension of justice and intercession towards mercy is a conversation happening within God's own self. Like this is what it means to believe that Jesus is God become human to be that intercessor. To say, within the community that is God's own self, there's that same dialogue taking place even right now I think.

Carissa: Yeah. It's complex. God's complex.

Tim: Totally. At least it seems so to me. But who am I but dust and ashes, at least as Abraham would say. There you go. Well, we just didn't wrap any of those up. But that was a great summary, Carissa. You could have said that at the beginning.

Carissa: It took me a while to reflect.

Tim: We could have left it there.

Jon: Thank you for all your questions and wrestling along with us as we think through this. We're going to continue this dialogue about that truth of God. Actually next is diving in deep into God's anger in that He is slow to anger. But what does that mean to be slow to anger? And why does God of the universe get angry in the first place? We're diving in deep with that for the next few weeks.

Tim: Yeah. I think it ended up being our most thorough treatment of both divine anger, but also divine judgment, and even stories about divine violence.

Carissa: Which is good because I think a lot of these questions that have come up already touch on that idea of anger, judgment, maybe even changing one's mind.

Tim: We're going there.

Jon: We're going there. It will probably create more questions, but also some new thoughts. I look forward to those episodes. So thank you for being a part of this with us. BibleProject is a nonprofit. We're in Portland, Oregon.

## Does God Curse Generations?

Our mission is to experience the Bible as a unified story that leads to Jesus. This podcast is one manifestation of that. It is edited by Dan Gummel, the show notes are by Camden McAfee, and the theme music is by the band Tents. This is a crowdfunded project, and we're grateful for all of you who are part of it with us. So thank you, and we'll see you next time.

Jeremy: Hi, this is Jeremy. I'm from Choctaw, Oklahoma. I first heard about the BibleProject from my friend Nate Minan. I use the BibleProject pretty much for fun and to learn about God. My favorite thing about the BibleProject is...what's my favorite part about the BibleProject? I don't know, man. The logo. What is my favorite thing though? I just like it in general. All right. My favorite thing about the BibleProject is how it pieces together the biggest seams of the Bible, and it really makes sense in my brain.

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