

CAN A CHRISTIAN INHERIT A GENERATIONAL CURSE?

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One phenomenon of Christian practice in Africa that really needs to be given serious reflective attention is the place of curses in the determination of the wellbeing of a Christian. In the past, stories have been told about some families which just seem to be dogged by continual “bad luck.” In certain families, there almost seems to be some sort of a ‘jinx’ of untimely and sudden deaths – even stretching back a few hundred years while in others, poverty seems to continually stalk even within prosperous countries and where people are not lazy and genuinely want to better themselves. I have also heard about one family which has tended to have various occultic involvements going back even several hundred years; even those family members who have personally rejected occultic involvement seemed to have found it exceptionally hard to prosper as one might have expected. The issue here is that in so many parts of Africa, it is widely believed that the curses incurred by the forefathers are really inherited by their descendants even generations after. But each time such cases appear before us on the level of experience, so many questions are aroused that challenge our basic convictions regarding the condition of the Christian person.

Interestingly, in our pastoral space, so many priests and pastors have most recently given much attention to the preaching of generational curses to the extent that they end up offering panaceas such as ‘healing the family root’ and conducting family deliverances for the family involved. Most times, a foundation for this belief and practice is found in the Scripture in such Old Testament passages as Ex 34: 6-7 (He punishes the children and their children for the sin of their fathers to the third and fourth generation); Lev 26: 39-42 (also because of their father’s sin, they will waste away). As a result, there are numerous young promising Christians who have been tied down by the fear that there is a curse hanging around somewhere and who have therefore closed up every aperture to growth and development. In the face of all these, the question that challenges the Christian thinker therefore is: ‘can a person be saved and yet still suffer because of family curses?’ What place has curses in the life of a Christian?

The word curse in Deuteronomy 11: 26 comes from the Hebrew word 'qalah' which is itself a derivative of 'qalal.' The meaning is: to abase, to vilify, to bring into contempt, to make despicable. Both in the Old Testament and New Testament theologies, a curse is the direct effect of sin and disobedience while blessings are an effect of fidelity and obedience to God's will (Deut 27 and Mtt 5). Ultimately when expanded, the theological meaning of being cursed is the loss of salvation. This salvation covers both material and eternal salvation. In the Old Testament, much of the condition of the cursed is limited to the material experience of suffering which may culminate in death as one sees in the judgment of Adam and Eve (Gen 3: 14-21), the punishment of Cain in Gen 4: 10-12, and the sentence of the three rebels, Abiram, Korah and Dathan in Num 16: 1-35. In fact, in Old Testament theology, physical suffering, material poverty and unevenness, and ultimately death are expressions of divine curses. In the New Testament, curses, the effect of sin not only affect the body but also the soul. What this means is that in the perspective of the New Testament, physical suffering does not so much connote curse as eternal damnation. While it is true that the blessing of God given to Christians in Christ brings material balance and prosperity to the Christian and long life (2 Cor 8:9), sometimes even a saint can experience physical suffering without it being a sign of being cursed. In the light of the New revelation, when human suffering is aligned to the cross, it ceases to be a manifestation of divine curse but a way to salvation.

In the Old Testament, there is a particular crisis regarding the inheritor of a divine curse which has given rise to different approaches in the debate. Some portions of the Pentateuch insist that the sins of the fathers are visited on the children and children's children like we read in Ex 34: 6-7 and Lev 26: 39-42. One finds the instances of this in the case of kings David and Solomon. When Solomon sinned, God said: 'for the sake of your father David, I will not do this in your lifetime, but during the reign of your son' (1 Kgs 11: 12). However, there are also some other passages that expressly contradict this first claim about the inheritor of curses. This second claim insists that the sinner should bear the responsibility of his sin. Deut 24: 16 makes the point very clear: 'fathers shall not be put to death for their sons, nor shall sons be put to death for their fathers; everyone shall be put to death for his own sin.' Ezekiel 18: 20 is even more blunt: 'the person who sins will die. The son will not bear the

punishment for the father's iniquity, nor will 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.'

These two Old Testament perspectives have given rise to two theological approaches in handling the phenomenon of curses: the charismatic and the anti-charismatic or conservative approach. For the charismatic approach, curses can be transferred across generations and therefore the only way to handle curses is through a kind of family deliverance to break the yoke of the curses. But for the conservative approach, a Christian cannot be cursed because Christ has removed all curses through the cross. The difficulty with the first approach lies in the fact that it does not consider the salvific work of Christ in the Christian while the latter approach is pretty too triumphalistic and perfectionist to the extent that it does not have any answer for the misfortunes that run through a particular Christian family from one generation to the other on the practical level.

There are many theologians who have made attempts to reconcile these two Old Testament claims and theological perspectives arising from it regarding the inheritance of curses. In the opinion of these theologians, these two perspectives are not contradictory, but rather, they express the two major dimensions of the phenomenon of sin. In this healthy opinion, sin has both an individual and social dimensions. When one sins, he/she causes a rupture in his personal relationship with God and with him/herself. It is a private thing for which the individual is held responsible. In fact, the Christian doctrine on the individual judgement that will take place immediately after death (Heb 9: 27) is a direct corollary of this claim that sin is a private affair. But at the same time, sin is a social phenomenon and therefore, it is pervasive. It affects the community. While the individual suffers the effect of his/her sin, the community shares in this sin to the extent it has a connection with the sin in question. Until the cause of sin is removed, the effect continues to pervade; once a condition of sin is allowed even by coming generations, they also share its effect.

These two dimensions of sin are reconciled in the New Testament. The New Testament is anchored on the person of Christ. Through His death and resurrection, He healed every antecedent curse, having defeated sin, the cause

of curses. In Christ, the Christian is healed and does not therefore need another special healing. Through baptism, the Christian becomes free from all generational curses and is summarily released from its frequency. There is no need for a special deliverance session. Through the new revelation, we are able to see that God cannot purposely create a person who is already cursed on the spiritual level. But the New Testament does not also lose sight of the social and pervasive character of sin. A person can suffer the effect of his father's action not in the sense that he/she is a fortiori cursed but in the sense that he/she has allowed the condition of his/her father's iniquity to be perpetrated. There are times when the son does not even need to do this but yet suffers as a result of the inevitable but foreseen consequences of his father's action. In a family in which the father and the mother take to lose sexual patterns, it can happen that with time the children from one generation to another may inherit a sexual disease that runs through the family blood. A family of weak industry can generate children who lack creativity and foresight to make money and live a decent life without support. Such a family can easily recreate cycles of poor persons from one generation to another.

In 2008, theologian Robin A. Brace wrote an article on the topic: *What is the Truth about Generational Curses?* Speaking on this point, he wrote: *"individuals, but especially large groups of individuals, can bring serious and, to a degree, accumulative suffering upon their own extended families of later generations because of their own serious behavioural failings; failings which had been accepted and tolerated; these failings could be moral, religious or physical. If the failings are physical, we are usually quicker to speak of family weaknesses due to heredity factors."*

For these reasons, it is always good for the Christian to understand well the condition of his/her problem/s before concluding that they have been cursed. The highest curse that can befall a Christian is to be in sin. What happens is that when the Christian is in sin, just like someone who has HIV places himself at the crossroad of diseases, the sinner places himself at the crossroad of divine curses. He allows himself to enter into the frequency of the effect of sin already committed and can therefore experience major or minor misfortunes both in the temporal and in the spiritual order. The highest deliverance a Christian can receive at the suspicion of any spiritual curse is a genuine

conversion. Conversion reinserts the Christian into Christ and shields him from any type of curse.

It is good to note that even when a person sins, there is no guarantee that the person will start to experience material difficulty. God can still allow the person to progress and see in His provision a reason to come back and repent. Not even a series of death can signal generational curse since physical death does not end the story of the Christian. Christians should therefore learn how to trust in God and continue to make efforts. Every Christian is a saved person and a healed person, signed with the sign of salvation and freed from all curses. The Christian needs to be in right relationship with God. This brings blessings but even when things are not as expected on the material level, the Christian should seek ordinary means of overcoming his difficulty with confidence and be willing to accept God's will even when all efforts to overcome certain difficulties fail. They should not easily be hoodwinked into accepting that they are cursed on the spiritual level. They should make sure that they properly understand the relation between their present and their future and see their interrelatedness. Then, as with other problems of life, they can as well pray when after all efforts have failed for God to intervene in their situations. Nothing is wrong with it even when they gather the family to pray together as a unit so long as they place their action in the right perspective. Therefore, it is good to end with an excerpt from Robin Brace's article once more: *"Once we understand that numerous charismatic 'deliverance leaders' are probably misunderstanding that word 'curse,' we can see that some of their highly extreme measures to 'bind the devil' in order to remove generational curses, are also in error. We begin to see that while it could be very wise for any families who might believe themselves to be affected in such a manner to gather together for deep prayer over this matter, this could be an area where we just have to accept that none of us can be totally unaffected while living in a fallen society."*