

Breaking the Cycle of GENERATIONAL



Often some of our deepest personal problems are rooted in something we can't control—dysfunctional family behavioral patterns that came before us. But we can control our choices, and each of us can choose life and good things!

In 1974 American singer and songwriter Harry Chapin recorded a song titled "Cat's in the Cradle." The song is about a father who is too busy to spend time with his son, instead offering vague promises to spend time with him in the future. In time, the boy grows up to become a man very much like his father, focused on career and other personal pursuits at the expense of family relations. As the father grows old and finally has time to look back on his life, he deeply desires to get to know his adult son and have a meaningful relationship with him.

Sadly, the father comes to realize that his son is absorbed with the same materialistic priorities he had, and so a close relationship will never happen. The last verse concludes with this sad line: *"And as I hung up the phone it occurred to me, he'd grown up just like me—my boy was just like me."*

Family influence passed down

This song reminds us of the universal influence one generation has on another. Family traits are often passed down from parents to children, and this cycle has been repeated for thousands of years.

Some of these traits may be positive and beneficial—like nurturing skills, valuing hard work or education. However, negative and destructive behavior is *also* passed down within families.

When God calls us and opens our minds to follow His way of life, we may not be fully aware of how our new relationship with Him will not only change us individually, but can also have a wonderful influence on our descendants, impacting future generations.

Many people selfishly live only for today. They don't understand or appreciate how one member of a family can impact other members. The Scriptures often remind us that it's important to *think generationally*.

Consider God's instruction in the Ten Commandments that "I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments" (Exodus 20:5-6).

It's easy to believe from this scripture that God simply punishes those who disrespect Him and blesses those who love Him. But God is not a vengeful and angry Father who intentionally punishes great-grandchildren for the sins committed generations earlier by others.

A better way to understand this scripture is to realize that *family dysfunctions and their consequences are passed down from parents to children and from generation to generation*. Curses are the result of breaking God's law, and many sins are perpetuated in the next generation by the poor example of the previous generation.

Repeating patterns of mistakes

Each human family has its own culture, including unique strengths and weaknesses. Some of these may be the result of genetic inheritance. For example, some families have a history of significant musical or athletic accomplishments passed down from parents to children, to grandchildren and even great-grandchildren.

Even though it takes great skill development to be an excellent musician or athlete, a certain *natural* endowment is inherited from birth. Modern science has also discovered that our genetics may even predispose us to certain diseases.

Other strengths and weaknesses within an individual family culture are the result of its *environment* or *choices*. This includes values, priorities and decision-making skills. When negative choices and a bad home environment become deeply entrenched within a family culture, individual members can become self-destructive and unknowingly pass on these traits.

Some of us come from family backgrounds of defeatism, divorce, pessimism, selfishness, greed, anger, addictions and laziness. Unless we break this curse, these traits may be passed on to our children. One's dysfunctional personal behavior becomes a *model* or example to the next generation, and the cycle can be repeated over and over again.

Often this continues until someone realizes that he or she can be the one to *break the cycle* and make a difference. By developing a meaningful relationship with *God* we will not only become more enriched and fulfilled, but we will also benefit many others, including our own descendants.

Abraham's amazing example

A number of biblical passages show us why we should all think generationally. Perhaps the most striking is the example of Abraham.

Abraham was an obedient "friend of God" (James 2:23). He rejected the pagan sinful culture of his family line and chose to live a new and positive way of life. At God's request Abraham left that environment and even his own family to follow the course God set for him. In doing so he would become known as "the father of the faithful."

Because of Abraham's willingness to abandon the sinful habits and practices of generations, God made specific promises to him about the future of his descendants. God told him, "I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth; so that if a man could number the dust of the earth, then your descendants also could be numbered" (Genesis 13:16).

Some of Abraham's descendants formed the core of what are now known as the major English-speaking nations and many other nations.

God further told Abraham, "I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:3).

Almost 2,000 years later Jesus Christ, a direct descendant of Abraham, would be born to atone for all sin and offer eternal life to all mankind. The entire world came to be blessed through Abraham because of his willingness to break with the patterns of past generations and embark on a new way of life revealed by God.

David, a man after God's own heart

Another example of how powerful and important a *personal* relationship with God is can be seen in God's expression of love for King David. Paul is recorded as quoting God in a powerful sermon by proclaiming, "I have found David the son of Jesse, a man after My own heart, who will do all My will.' From this man's seed, according to the promise, God raised up for Israel a Savior—Jesus" (Acts 13:22-23).

Jesus Christ was a descendant of King David, and both of them were physical descendants of Abraham. But did David's personal relationship have a positive effect on any of his other direct descendants? Did this *personal relationship* between God and David have benefits for David's great-grandchildren and beyond?

Let's move forward in history to about 50 years after David's death to a significant time in Judah's survival as a nation.

Abijah (also spelled Abijam) was the great-grandson of King David, but wasn't faithful to God's law. Scripture records that he "did all the same sins his father before him had done. Abijah was not faithful to the Lord his God as David, his great-grandfather, had been" (1 Kings 15:3, New Century Version).

At first glance we might expect Abijah to be severely punished for his sins, and perhaps others along with him. Yet the very next verse tells us something quite different: "Because the Lord loved David, the Lord gave him a kingdom in Jerusalem and allowed him to have a son to be king after him. The Lord also kept Jerusalem safe" (verse 4, NCV).

More than 50 years after David died, God showed one of his descendants *mercy* because of the faithfulness of his great-grandfather! God said in effect, "I am not doing this for you, Abijah, but because of the *relationship* I had with your great-grandfather David, I will show mercy to you."

Did David's relationship with God benefit any of his other descendants?

Many generations later King Hezekiah lay dying while the nation was being threatened by powerful Assyrian armies. The king fervently prayed to God for deliverance and the prophet Isaiah was sent to him with this message:

"Thus says the Lord, the God of David your father [ancestor]: I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; surely I will heal you. On the third day you shall go up to the house of the Lord. And I will add to your days fifteen years. I will deliver you and this city from the hand of the king of Assyria; and I will defend this city for My own sake, and *for the sake of My servant David*" (2 Kings 20:5-6).

More than 250 years after David died, God here showed *mercy* to his descendant because of David's personal relationship with God. Notice that God even identifies Himself as the "God of David" and proclaims that He will both heal Hezekiah and protect the nation for "the sake of My servant David."

Again, God says in effect, "Hezekiah, I am not doing this just for your sake! I am doing it because of My relationship with your ancestor David." Do you see what a powerful influence just one individual can have, impacting his or her descendants for generations? Do you realize that *you* can be the Abraham or David in your family, setting a pattern that may bless your descendants generations from now?

A shocking example from history

How powerful can the generational influence of parents be on their own family and descendants? In 1874 a member of the New York State Prison Board noticed that six members of the same family were incarcerated at the same time. The board did some research, looking back a few generations to try to find the original couple who initiated this tragic family legacy.

They traced the family line back to an ancestor born in 1720, a man considered lazy and godless with a reputation as the town troublemaker. He was also an alcoholic and viewed as having low moral character. To make matters worse, he married a woman who was much like himself, and together they had six daughters and two sons.

Here is what the report revealed about the approximately 1,200 descendants of this couple who were alive by 1874: 310 were homeless; 160 were prostitutes; 180 suffered from drug or alcohol abuse; 150 were criminals who spent time in prison, including *seven for murder*.

The report also found that the State of New York had spent \$1.5 million—a shockingly high number at the time—to care for this line of descendants, and *not one* had made a significant contribution to society.

Sadly, we can see by this example how the harmful dysfunctions of parents can be passed down from generation to generation.

A refreshing contrast

In contrast, another family heritage was studied involving a couple who lived about the same time. This second family study began with the famous preacher Jonathan Edwards, who was born in 1703. A deeply religious man, he lived a life of strong moral values and became a minister and a dedicated family man.

He married a deeply religious woman named Sarah who shared his values, and together they had 11 children. Eventually, Jonathan Edwards became the president of Princeton University. Here is what researchers discovered about the approximately 1,400 descendants of Jonathan and Sarah Edwards by 1874: 13 were college presidents; 65 were college professors; 100 were attorneys; 32 were state judges; 85 were authors of classic books; 66 were physicians; 80 held political offices, including three state governors; 3 were state senators; 1 became vice president of the United States.

What a difference it makes in the kind of example and values that are passed down to the next generation! Strong moral values can indeed bring blessings and opportunities for generations yet to be born!

Rooting out weakness and sin

Many scriptures confirm that family cultures can be destructive. You and I are also a product of our own family's heritage going back for many, many years! Some of the weaknesses we have are a result of them being passed down *directly* to us by our parents' or grandparents' personal examples. In some cases a family sin may go so far back that no one now knows where it began!

A responsibility we all have is to root out these weaknesses and set a better example for our own children and grandchildren. This commitment to overcome our weaknesses and change our lives can also richly benefit our siblings, cousins, nieces, nephews and other extended family members.

Studies show that families tend to reproduce their own culture and dysfunctions for generations. For example, selfish parents produce selfish children. An alcoholic parent is likely to produce alcoholic children. Spousal abusers often produce children who grow up and abuse *their* spouses or are abused *by* their spouses.

Parents with negative lifestyles and attitudes tend to produce offspring who are unproductive and discouraged. Research has demonstrated that approximately 90 percent of people incarcerated in the United States have had either a parent or close family member in jail before.

Habitual problems may go back for generations in your family, but you can be the Abraham or David in your lineage! You can be the one to make better choices and break the curse of generational dysfunctions in your family!

We need to recognize what is happening and make a conscious decision to, with God's help, create a new, *positive* family heritage.

God told the people of ancient Israel that He loved them and wanted them to be a *better* people by obeying His commandments. He wanted both them and their descendants to be happy and blessed. Through Moses He pleaded with them to make the right choices and proclaimed, "I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore *choose life*, that *both you and your descendants may live*" (Deuteronomy 30:19).

Your choices aren't yours alone

The choices and decisions we make don't just affect ourselves, but also our children, grandchildren and future generations yet unborn.

Have you considered that you never really make a choice alone? It's been said that you are always taking your parents *and* your children with you throughout your life. In other words, *most decisions* you make are affected by the deep personal influence of your parents. On the other hand, *your* lifestyle choices and major decisions will also affect future generations of your family.

Even if you lack the personal desire to overcome serious problems for your own sake, *do it for your family*. Think *generationally* about how your behavior will benefit or harm your descendants.

God's Word has shown us that He may have mercy on others because of the life we live. If you're struggling with a serious problem, why not decide to stand in the gap and be the Abraham in your family! Make the choices now that will let others years from now see the changes you made personally and say, *"Here is where it all turned around!"*

We read earlier in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 30 that we literally have the ability *to choose blessings or curses*. Dysfunctions and sins that are allowed to continue may be passed down for generations. Yet we have also seen that God will *bless* the descendants of those who love Him.

You can put a stop to it

If you have a family legacy of negativity, addictions, poverty, divorce, greed or selfishness, *you* can be the one to put a stop to it. All of us are dealing with issues from our family histories. Sometimes we must confront problems that go back many generations.

The good news is that we don't have to do this alone. God offers us the help of His Spirit so we can put a stop to these destructive habits and make life even more productive for our descendants. God's Spirit within us can literally change our lives as we move away from sinful habits toward a new, spirit-led nature (Galatians 5:19-25).

Some personal problems are so entrenched that we need to be humble enough to ask for help. Don't be hesitant to contact a minister or health-care professional if you continue to struggle with a problem and realize you need additional support. There is no shame in asking for help and encouragement from others!

When we are faithful and have a deep relationship centered on obedience to God, He will not deal with our descendants like someone who doesn't have a godly heritage. You may look at your family tree and not like what you see. However, beginning with you a new family tree can be planted that blesses everyone around it with the fruit of God's Spirit, including joy, faithfulness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

Think *generationally* in your life. How you live today and the kind of relationship you have with God can affect your descendants for generations to come and make their lives better! Why not become the Abraham in your family?