

## FREED FROM VICTIMHOOD

Ezekiel 18

The great basketball coach John Wooden wrote:

As my father reminded me more than once, “Great leaders give credit to others and accept the blame themselves.” If one of my assistant coaches made a suggestion that we decided to implement, I would make sure to praise him for his foresight in the press conference afterward. But if one made a suggestion that didn’t prove to be as successful, I accepted the blame myself rather than pinning it on the assistant. After all, as the head coach, I had decided to go forward with it. I found that this was the most effective way to keep my assistant coaches feeling engaged with the game, willing to make suggestions and ready to contribute to the betterment of the team. It worked with my players, too. I would never publicly criticize a player for poor performance. Even in moments of extreme frustration, I would check myself because it just didn’t seem right—because it didn’t seem like something my father would have done. And I’m proud to say that to the best of my knowledge, I never did slip up in that regard.

In the book *The Essential Wooden*, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar described Wooden, who was his coach at UCLA, this way:

We understood that if we played up to the standard he had set in practice, we’d probably win. If not, if we lost, he took the blame and tried to fix it the next practice. He was very focused, very intense. Always, always with his emotions under control.

The idea of taking the blame when things go wrong can be very noble, but it is so hard to do. It is so much easier to blame someone else and play the part of the victim. That is certainly a big controversy in our society today. Many feel that people who should be taking responsibility are trying to get out of it by claiming they are the victims. Most of time it depends on which end of the blame you are on. Many older people are against the government paying off students loans, but how would they feel if they had that debt? The cost of going to college has exploded. Others see people getting away with crime, while on the other side are those raised in poverty that sees no alternative to it.

If any groups see themselves as victims, it was the people Ezekiel prophesied to. Ezekiel was among the first group of people taken into captivity to Babylon. God had warned His people Israel that they would be punished if they continue to forget Him and worship other gods. First He allowed the Assyrians to destroy the northern kingdom. Then He sent the Babylonians to punish the rest around the city of Jerusalem. The captives like Ezekiel put their hope in God preventing Jerusalem and the temple from being conquered. But through Ezekiel God warned that the Babylonians would come back and destroy the temple. Instead of turning to God for forgiveness, they blamed their ancestors. They said, “The parents eat sour grapes,

and the children's teeth are set on edge." In other words, "Our ancestors screwed up, and now we take the punishment for them." They were playing the victim.

We are so tempted to play the victim. It is very easy to see in a marriage. We become experts on the shortcomings of our husband or wife. So it is easy to see that the solution to problems in a marriage is for him or her to shape up. The problem cannot be with me!

We hear about people who claim in the most ridiculous ways to be victims. A woman sued a candy company because she claimed it did not warn her there was sugar in their jelly beans. A kidnapper sued those he kidnapped because they didn't help him escape from the police. A fireman claimed discrimination because his fear of fire led the department to give him a desk job. A man sued a beer company because his dreams did not come true drinking the beer as ads indicated.

All that seems so silly. How do you think it is to God when we try to play victim with Him? We have a whole list of excuses when confronted with our sin. Our parents brought us up with bad habits. We have innate compulsions that we were born with. If God didn't want us to get drunk, overeat, have sex outside of marriage, and hold on to our temper, then why did He make us with those desires? If we fail to do what he wants us to do, well no one's perfect. "To err is human."

I remember as a child on the way to school in the car on Monday mornings anxious to listen to the weekly broadcast of "Monday Morning Quarterback." A sports reporter would always give his assessment of the Sunday game by the home team.

It is easy to be a "Monday Morning Quarterback." We can come up with brilliant analysis. But the bottom line is that we are not on the playing field. Then it is all about "their mistakes, not mine." And we like it that way because no one is going to point the blame at us.

But God puts us on the field. "For everyone belongs to Me, the parent as well as the child—both alike belong to Me. The one who sins is the one who will die."

It is a totally different thing to be on the field. Deion Sanders is causing quite a stir as coach of the Colorado football team. He was a Hall of Fame cornerback in the NFL. But he also played ten years of Major League Baseball. He said the hardest thing he ever had to do was hit a baseball. The ball is pitched over 95 mph from just 90 feet away. As he said, "If you get it just a third of the time, you are a great success. Most of the time you fail."

On the "playing field" of life we miss most of time. God shows us who we really are; not victims who deserve pity, but sinners who deserve to die. But why does He do that? He does that to get to the root of our problems, not how others treat us, but what we have done to ourselves. If we paint over rust, the rust will appear again. If we cover and try to ignore a bad infection, it will grow worse. If we do not admit we have an addiction like alcoholism, then we never will be cured. God tells us in Ezekiel, "I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked." What God delights in is the sinner turning to Him for help.

“The soul that sins shall die.” Death is the proof that we are at fault, not the victims. But God became the true victim for us. Jesus, the truly innocent one, allowed Himself to take all the punishment we deserve. He took the blame; we receive the blessing. Jesus got on the “playing field” with us, not with the power of God Almighty, but with His love. He won the victory for us by allowing Himself to be beaten on the cross. But He took our sins with Him. And He rose freed from it so we can be freed as well. Now we can turn from sin and put our lives in God’s hands. Now we can be saved. Now we are freed from pretending we are victims and embracing God’s full love. Now we are God’s!