

FROM GENERATION TO GENERATION

Introduction

This is a generation in Australia which has seen widespread failing away from Christian faith in God. It would appear to be unusual for children to be following their parents in faith. Yet at the same time we also see a number of young people whose faith is stronger than that of their parents.

As we grow older, we become more aware of the generations, and the relationships between them. We become parents, and grandparents, and great grandparents! So these matters concern us more, and involve us in prayer and action.

We know of 'dynasties' who in generation after generation have given rise to those in Christian faith and ministry, and those who have come into faith only in the last generation.

What is the Biblical 'norm'? How does God deal with the generations'? How are we to believe, pray and act in this context?

Generations and Family Trees

According to the Bible, God has a great interest in generations and genealogies. It would seem even the creation is ordered in a 'family' kind of way:

These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created. *Genesis 2:4*

This would appear to refer to the elements of the creation in chapter 1, coming into being in ordered succession. We think also of how night and day follow one another, and pass on the message of God's glory from one to the next:

The heavens are telling the glory of God and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. *Psalms 19:1-2*

But it is with the human families that God is particularly concerned. 'Generations' feature and genealogies abound in the books of Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Ruth, and I Chronicles. For example:

This is the book of the generations of Adam. When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God. Male and female he created them, and he blessed them and named them Man when they were created. When Adam had lived a hundred and thirty years, he became the father of a son in his own likeness, after his image, and named him Seth. The days of Adam after he became the father of Seth were eight hundred years: and he had other sons and daughters. Thus all the days that Adam lived were nine hundred and thirty years; and he died. When Seth had lived a hundred and thirty years, he became the father of Enosh ... *Genesis 5:1-6*

The 'table of the nations' in Genesis 10 is especially expansive and far-reaching:

These are the generations of the sons of Noah, Shem, Ham, and Japheth; sons were born to them after the flood ... These are the families of the sons of Noah, according to their genealogies, in their nations; and from these the nations spread abroad on the earth after the flood. *Genesis 10:1, 32*

This is the prelude to God's focussing on the family of Abraham, in whom 'all the families of the earth shall be blessed' (Genesis 12:3).

The genealogy in Exodus shows a typical narrowing down to focus on a particular purpose in God's working:

These are the heads of their fathers' houses: the sons of Reuben, the first-born of Israel: Hanoch, Pallu, Hezron, and Carmi; these are the families of Reuben. 15 The sons of Simeon: Jemu'el, Jamin, Ohad, Jachin, Zohar, and Shaul, the son of a Canaanite woman; these are the families of Simeon. 16 These are the names of the sons of Levi according to their generations: Gershon, Kohath, and Merar'i, the years of the life of Levi being a hundred and thirty-seven years. 17 The sons of Gershon: Libni and Shim'e-i, by their families, 18 The sons of Kohath: Amram, Izhar, Hebron, and Uz'ziel, the years of the life of Kohath being a hundred and thirty-three years. 19 The sons of Merar'i: Mahli and Mushi. These are the families of the Levites according to their generations. 20 Amram took to wife Joch'ebed his father's sister and she bore him Aaron and Moses, the years of the life of Amram being one hundred and thirty-seven years. 21 The sons of Izhar. Korah, Nepheg, and Zichri. 22 And the sons of Uz'ziel: Mi'sha-el, Elza'phan, and Sithri. 23 Aaron took to wife Eli'sheba, the daughter of Ammin'adab and the sister of Nahshon; and she bore him Nadab, Abi'hu, Elea'zar, and Ith'amar. 24 The sons of Korah: Assir, Elka'nah, and Abi'asaph; these are the families of the Ko'rahites. 25 Elea'zar, Aaron's son, took to wife one of the daughters of Pu'ti-el; and she bore him Phin'ehas. These are the heads of the fathers' houses of the Levites by their families. 26 These are the Aaron and Moses to whom the LORD said: "Bring out the people of Israel from the land of Egypt by their hosts." 27 It was they who spoke to Pharaoh king of Egypt about bringing out the people of Israel from Egypt, this Moses and this Aaron. *Exodus 6:14-27*

This identifies them, and lets us know where they belong in God's scheme of things.

Genealogies giving the lineage of Jesus, from Adam, Abraham and David. are in Luke 3 and Matthew 1.

These lists of generations are not to be despised or taken lightly. They tell us that God takes detailed note of the people in each generation. They are important enough to Him to be recorded in Scripture, even if we now know little more of many who were mentioned. Psalm 87 opens the rich vein of 'the Book of Life' by which 'the Lord knows those who are his' (2 Timothy 2:19), including 'ring-ins' from other nations:

Among those who know me I mention Rahab and Babylon; behold, Philistia and Tyre, with Ethiopia-"this one was born there," they say. And of Zion it shall be said, "This one and that one were born in her"; for the Most High himself will establish her. The LORD records as he registers the peoples,

“This one was born there.” Psalm 87:4-6 They also convey a sense of legitimacy and belonging in God’s purposes. I know of one Aboriginal community in Australia that was electrified by the translation into their own language of the genealogy in Matthew 1. This, for them, with their strong sense of ongoing family relationships, was what authenticated the gospel as true, and true to life.

Besides, if we skip over the genealogies, we could miss out on some homely and intriguing personal details:

Jabez was more honourable than his brothers; and his mother called his name Jabez, saying, “Because I bore him in pain.” Jabez called on the God of Israel, saying, “Oh that thou wouldst bless me and enlarge my border, and that thy hand might be with me, and that thou wouldst keep me from harm so that it might not hurt me!” And God granted what he asked. I *Chronicles* 4:9-10

That’s all we know about Jabez. But there must be quite a story behind all that!

Children of God and children of the devil

Before ‘the book of the generations of Adam’ through Seth in Genesis 5 there has already been an enumeration of the children of Cain. It would appear the ‘children of God’, through whom will come the ‘seed’ of the woman who will bruise the serpent’s head (Genesis 3:15) are being set over against the children ‘of the evil one’ (see 1 John 3:10-18, see also John 8:44). In Genesis 6:2 it would appear that they intermarry, and the trouble and strife are compounded.

This should alert us to the fact that in every generation there will be those who belong to God through faith and know God’s favour (as in Hebrews 11:4ff), and those who are opposed to God, and that everyone is either one or the other.

How does God deal with the generations?

God clearly sets out the way in which He operates in the second of the Ten Commandments:

You shall not make for yourself a graven 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 upon 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

Here again the distinction is made between those who love God and those who hate Him. Those who continue to love and obey God will know His steadfast love, to thousands of generations, without a break necessarily. In those generations that continue to hate God, sin and its judgement will be repeated in each generation. But God in His mercy puts a limit on that: hatred of God will last no longer than three or four generations, before people turn back to him. This makes clear that such turning back, at any time, is purely by the grace-action and merciful love of God. But at any time, without waiting for the third or fourth generation,

anyone who will can turn to the love of God, and know His steadfast love for thousands of unbroken generations.

There is one family in the Bible we can trace to see if this is so: the royal household of Judah. From the time the distinction is made between those who ‘did what is right in the eyes of the LORD’ and those who ‘did evil’, it goes as follows (though in a number of cases they were a, mixed bag):

Rehoboam	evil	(I Kings 1-022)
Abijah	evil	(I Kings 15:3)
Asa	right	(I Kings 15:11)
Jehoshaphat	right	(I Kings 22:45)
Jehoram	evil	(2 Kings 8:18)
Ahaziah	evil	(2 Kings 8:27)
[Athaliah	evil	(2 Kings 11: 1)]
Joash	right	(2 Kings 12:2)
Amaziah	right	(2 Kings 14:3)
Azariah (Uzziah)	right	(2 Kings 15:3)
Jotham	right	(2 Kings 15:34)
Ahaz	evil	(2 Kings 16:2)
Hezekiah	right	(2 Kings 18:3)
Manasseh	evil	(2 Kings 21)
Amon	evil	(2 Kings 21:20)
Josiah	right	(2 Kings 22:2)
Jehoahaz	evil	(2 Kings 23:32)
Jehoiakim (Eliakim, son of Josiah)	evil	(2 Kings 23:37)
Jehoiachin	evil	(2 Kings 24:9)

Zedekiah (Mattaniah, son of Josiah) evil (2 Kings 24:19)

Here we see how God was faithful to His stated undertaking in Exodus 20:4-6.

Ezekiel 18 sets this out in detail. Each generation is answerable to God as to whether it is in a righteous relationship with God or not, and in each generation there is the merciful provision of the opportunity to repent and live.

Behold, all souls are mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is mine: the soul that sins shall die. If a man is righteous and does what is lawful and right ... he is righteous, he shall surely live, says the Lord GOD.

If he begets a son who is a robber, a shedder of blood, who does none of these duties ... shall he then live? He shall not live. He has done all these abominable things; he shall surely die; his blood shall be upon himself. But if this man begets a son who sees all the sins which his father has done, and fears, and does not do likewise ... observes my ordinances, and walks in my statutes; he shall not die for his father’s iniquity; he shall surely live. The soul that sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son; the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself.

But if a wicked man turns away from all his sins which he has committed and keeps all my statutes and does what is lawful and right, he shall surely live; he shall not die. None of the transgressions which he has committed shall be remembered against him; for the righteousness which he has done he shall live. Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord GOD, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live? ... When a righteous man turns away from his righteousness and commits iniquity, he shall die for it-, for the iniquity which he has committed he shall die. Again, when a wicked man turns away from the wickedness he has committed and does what is lawful and right, he shall save his life. Because he considered and turned away from all the transgressions which he had committed, he shall surely live, he shall not die ... Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways, says the Lord GOD. Repent and turn from all your transgressions, lest iniquity be your ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions which you have committed against me, and get 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 any one, says the Lord GOD; so turn, and live.

Generations and the Covenant of God

God's covenant-undertaking with Israel, with a view to His covenant with all the earth, is that there should be atonement for sins and a relationship with God in obedience that prevails 'throughout your generations'. This is repeated many times. For example, with regard to the altar of incense:

you shall put it before the veil that is by the ark of the testimony, before the mercy seat that is over the testimony, where I will meet with you. And Aaron shall bum fragrant incense on it; every morning when he dresses the lamps he shall bum it, and when Aaron sets up the lamps in the evening, he shall bum it, a perpetual incense before the LORD *throughout your generations*. You shall offer no unholy incense thereon, nor burnt offering, nor cereal offering; and you shall pour no libation thereon. Aaron shall make atonement upon its horns once a year; with the blood of the sin offering of atonement he shall make atonement for it once in the year *throughout your generations*; it is most holy to the LORD.
Exodus 30:6-10

So also, under the new covenant in Christ, his mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation. *Luke 1:50*

Of course, under the covenant, a particular generation may choose to be rebellious, and will suffer the consequences, as the generation in the wilderness did:

For forty years I loathed that generation and said, "They are a people who err in heart, and they do not regard my ways." Therefore I swore in my anger that they should not enter my rest. Psalm 95:10-11 But we can learn from them that it does not have to be that way:

Give ear, O my people, to my teaching; incline your ears to the words of my mouth! I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings from of old, things that we have heard and known, that our fathers have told us. We will not hide them from their children, but tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might, and the wonders which he has wrought. He established a testimony in Jacob, and appointed a law

in Israel, which he **commanded our fathers** to teach to their children; that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and arise and tell them to their children so that they should set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments; and that they should not be like their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation whose heart was not steadfast, whose spirit was not faithful to God. Psalm 78:1-8

Teach them diligently to your children

Thus we can with confidence take up the passing on of the faith, knowing that God will be faithful to His purpose of love from generation to generation:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD; and you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. And you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

In the New Testament, apart from the injunctions regarding family life in Ephesians 6:1-4 and Colossians 3:20-21, we have the lovely picture of Timothy needing to be bold in what he has so richly received:

I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you. Hence I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; for God did not give us a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power and love and self-control. Do not be ashamed then of testifying to our Lord... 2 Timothy 1:5-8

We see here So Paul's own relationship with Timothy as 'my true child in the faith' (1 Timothy 1:2), and his enjoining of Timothy to be about setting up others in ministry: You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me before many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. 2 Timothy 2:1-2

May these things inform and inspire our faith, our prayer, and our actions.