

Question: What does God’s Word mean when it says, “a person shall bear their own sin or guilt”?

Answer: Let’s examine the Scriptures closely.

Leviticus 5:17 states:

“If a person sins, doing any one of the things that by the Lord’s commandments ought not to be done, though he did not know it, he is still guilty and shall bear his iniquity.”

This passage highlights the principle of individual moral responsibility—each person is accountable before God for their own sins, whether willful or ignorant. Theologically, this aligns with the doctrine of personal accountability (Ezekiel 18:20,: “The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father...”).

Similarly, Leviticus 24:15-16 says:

“Whoever curses God shall bear his sin. Whoever blasphemes the name of the Lord shall be put to death.”

Here we see the seriousness of sin against God’s holiness, where the sinner alone bears the guilt.

Retributive Justice in the Old Testament

The Old Testament law operated under the principle of lex talionis (“law of retaliation”), expressed in passages such as Exodus 21:23-25:

“But if there is harm, then you shall pay life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot...”

This principle was meant to limit excessive punishment and ensure justice was proportional, not vengeful. It demonstrated God’s justice and holiness in maintaining order (Deuteronomy 19:21).

Leviticus 24:17-20 reiterates this principle:

“Whoever kills a human being shall be put to death. Whoever kills an animal shall make it good, life for life. If anyone injures his neighbor, as he has done it shall be done to him: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth...”

No Retribution for Punishment Executed Under God’s Command

In certain cases, such as blasphemy or idolatry, those who executed God’s judgment were not punished. For example, the blasphemer was stoned (Leviticus 24:14-16), but those who carried out the sentence did not bear guilt for murder.

This reflects the theological distinction between divine justice and human vengeance. The punishment was ordained by God, so the sinner alone bore responsibility for the sin and its consequences. This is the sense in which “the one who died bears their own sin” — the sin and guilt do not transfer to the executioners.

What Does “A Person Shall Bear Their Own Sin” Mean? (Leviticus 5:17)

Bearing the Sin of an Innocent Person

If someone killed an innocent person, the killers bore the guilt of murder and were to be punished (Numbers 35:30: “Whoever kills a person shall be put to death...”). This is referred to as “bearing the blood” of another (Genesis 9:5-6), emphasizing the sacredness of human life as made in God’s image (Imago Dei).

New Testament Teaching on Justice and Vengeance

In the New Testament, the principle of personal accountability remains (Romans 14:12: “So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.”), but the approach to justice changes radically.

Jesus teaches in Matthew 5:38-39:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.”

This reveals the kingdom ethic of forgiveness and grace, replacing strict retribution.

Paul reiterates in Romans 12:19:

“Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’”

Thus, the New Testament forbids personal vengeance, emphasizing God’s justice and mercy.

May the Lord help us live responsibly and humbly before Him, trusting His justice and mercy.

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