

The Buck Stops Here

by David F. Maas

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Emily Dickinson once wrote a cynical poem about a disgusting proclivity of human nature—to act irresponsibly and then to attempt to dodge the inevitable consequences:

The Heart asks pleasure—first—
And then—Excuse from Pain—
And then—those little Anodynes
That deaden suffering—
And then—to go to sleep—
And then—if it should be
The will of its Inquisitor—
The privilege to die—

In recent years, "victims" of self-imposed tobacco addiction had the chutzpah to attempt to extort millions of dollars from the deep pockets of big tobacco companies, shifting the blame for their own lack of self-control, as well as their inability to read the ubiquitous ominous warnings from the Surgeon General. Our courts are full of baseless lawsuits in which the plaintiff wants compensation for his own carelessness, stupidity or ignorance. Too few people today have the gumption to admit they are at fault.

Refusal to accept responsibility was perhaps the most striking trademark of the recent former president who, according to Bill Whalen of the Hoover Institution, "blamed Colin Powell for the death of U.S. troops in Somalia, Bob Dole for the 'don't ask, don't tell' controversy, and sex-obsessed Republicans for forcing him to commit perjury and obstruct justice." After he allowed Janet Reno to take the heat for the botched Waco fiasco, a prominent radio commentator parodied him in a humorous variation of the Harry Truman expression, "The buck never got here!"

In Robert Ferrell's informative biography, *Harry S. Truman: A Life*, he explains how and where Harry Truman, who made it a practice to accept responsibility, picked up the expression, "The buck stops here," which he displayed prominently on a plaque at the front of his White House desk. According to Ferrell:

. . . the saying had originated in the old frontier days, when players at poker tables used a marker or counter, often a knife with a buck-horn handle, to indicate the person whose turn it was to deal. If the player did not want to deal, he could pass the responsibility by passing the "buck," as the counter came to be called. Truman's refusal to do so had been a hallmark of his political career from the country level up.

Passing the Buck

Throughout the Bible, we find myriad examples of people, not assuming responsibilities for their own actions or behavior, but instead "passing the buck," blaming others for their own mistakes.

Our original parents lose little time refusing to accept responsibility for their errors, shifting the blame to someone else. Notice Genesis 3:12: "Then the man said, 'The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I ate.'" When God confronts Eve, she also refuses to accept responsibility for her own action: "And the Lord God said to the woman, 'What is this you have done?' And the woman said, 'The serpent deceived me, and I ate it'" (verse 13).

Their offspring, Cain, learns from their example to shirk responsibility for his own actions: "Then the LORD said to Cain, 'Where is Abel your brother?' And he said, 'I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?'" (Genesis 4:9). Cain seems to shift his responsibility to God with his rather flippant retort: "Is he my responsibility?" or, "Am I responsible for him?"

Even some of the most faithful people succumb to this human failing. After Sarah persuades Abram to cohabit with Hagar, she conveniently shifts the blame to Abram when the consequences turn out differently than she had expected: "Then Sarai said to Abram, 'My wrong be unto you! I gave my maid into your embrace; and when she saw that she had conceived, I became despised in her eyes. The LORD judge between you and me'" (Genesis 16:5). Sarah blames Abram for the acute discomfort in which she has placed herself by her prior request.

After Esau frivolously and carelessly sells his birthright for a bowl of red lentil stew and bread—demonstrating his lack of self-control and his contempt for his birthright—he bitterly accuses Jacob of stealing it from him, just as his twin brother had stolen the blessing. "And Esau said, 'Is he not rightly named Jacob? For he has supplanted me these two times. He took away my birthright, and now look, he has taken away my blessing!'" (Genesis 27:36). Evidently, he has totally forgotten about his own responsibility—really, his irresponsibility—in the earlier transaction.

Israel's first high priest is no more immune to this not-my-fault syndrome than we are. When Moses confronts Aaron about his responsibility in forging the molten calf, Aaron quickly shifts the blame to the people:

So Aaron said, "Do not let the anger of my lord become hot. You know the people, that they are set on evil. For they said to me, 'Make us gods that shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.' And I said to them, 'Whoever has any gold, let them break it off.' So they gave it to me, and I cast it into the fire, and this calf came out." (Exodus 32:22-24)

Aaron, in effect, denies all culpability in the shaping and molding of this idol, a deed for which he is largely responsible.

Saul, like a recent former president, was quick to assume the credit for things done correctly and properly, but lightning quick to shift the blame for things running amok:

And Saul said to Samuel, "But I have obeyed the voice of the LORD, and gone on the mission on which the LORD sent me, and brought back Agag, king of Amalek; I have utterly destroyed the Amalekites. But the people took of the plunder, sheep and oxen, the best of the things which should have been utterly destroyed, to sacrifice to the LORD your God in Gilgal." (I Samuel 15:20-21)

This shirking of accountability appears in the New Testament too. The death of our Savior is partially attributed to a leader shifting the burden of responsibility onto the people. Rather than making an unpopular decision, he "washes his hands" of the responsibility:

When Pilate saw that he could not prevail at all, but rather that a tumult was rising, he took water and washed his hands before the multitude, saying, "I am innocent of the blood of this just Person. You see to it." And all the people answered and said, "His blood be on us and our children." (Matthew 27:24-25)

Notice how the people also presumptuously pass the responsibility onto their extant and unborn offspring. How incredible! How could one who does not yet exist be responsible for the actions of others?

Reality Therapy

Modern-day Israel has a remarkable tradition of not assuming personal responsibility but transferring it to someone or something else.

In his book, *Whatever Became of Sin?* psychiatrist Karl Menninger describes a bizarre metamorphosis in which behaviors that were once termed "sin" are renamed crimes, "rendering the designation sin increasingly pointless from a practical standpoint." Later in the "progression of our civilization the behavior once called crime was relabeled or reclassified as 'illness.'" Menninger suggests that "some sins," ones that never became proscribed by law and labeled "crimes," are also regarded now as symptomatic. In his chapter on "Sin as Collective Irresponsibility," Menninger concludes, "We have ceased to be so completely individualistic and have joined together with others in many ways to do and to share many things, including responsibility for crime and sin." Because we behave in groups, we are no longer individually accountable for our actions but share responsibility with the members of the group.

Swimming against the prevailing current of group irresponsibility, Dr. William Glasser, the father of reality therapy and choice theory, has built a system of counseling based on the premise, "We choose what we do; things do not happen to us." Glasser expresses perturbed amazement that people "have a hard time getting over the external control idea that a difficult life situation makes people into victims." Advocating self-responsibility, he insists that if someone decides to become an alcoholic, "it is his choice: he is not a victim of his heredity, or anything else." In affirming self-responsibility, Glasser maintains, "Reality therapy contends that while we are all products of our past, unless we choose to be so, we need not be victims of the past. And, all of our counseling is to help people make the choice not to become, or continue to be, a victim."

One of the first major figures in scripture to practice reality therapy—that is, assuming responsibility for his behavior—is, of all people, Judah, son of Jacob. One could even speculate that doing so led to his receiving the scepter promise in Genesis 49:8-12. Although he initially acts deceitfully and in a shamelessly mercenary fashion in the sale of his brother, Joseph, into slavery, Judah later undergoes a metamorphosis in which he becomes the truly responsible leader of the brothers. By taking full responsibility for the safety of his brother Benjamin, he shows fruit of repentance from his former behavior and the beginnings of character growth.

An intervening event helped to contribute to his assumption of responsibility. When Judah's firstborn son, Er, dies, leaving his daughter-in-law Tamar childless, thus unable to continue the line of Er, he instructs his second son, Onan, "Go in to your brother's wife and marry her, and raise up an heir to your brother" (Genesis 38:8). Onan's refusal leads to his death, leaving the grieving Judah with two deceased sons. Fearfully perhaps, Judah denies Tamar the services of his third son, Shelah. Angrily, Tamar masquerades as a prostitute to seduce Judah. When Tamar becomes pregnant and exposes Judah, he owns up to his behavior and publicly repents, saying, "She has been more righteous than I, because I did not give her to Shelah my son" (verse 26).

Rabbi Paul Saiger, in his article "Judah: Our Overlooked Patriarch," quotes Maimonides, suggesting "the truest form of repentance occurs when someone has not only publicly confessed his or her sin and sought atonement, but has subsequently found himself or herself in a similar situation and has refrained from sinning." Judah's repentance for this misdeed is heartfelt and genuine. His subsequent behavior indicates that he had matured and grown as the result of this humiliating experience.

We can glimpse the fruits of his repentance in his negotiations with his father Jacob concerning Benjamin's safety:

Then Judah said to Israel his father, "Send the lad with me, and we will arise and go, that we may live and not die, both we and you and also our little ones. I myself will be surety for him; from my hand you shall require him. If I do not bring him back to you and set him before you, then let me bear the blame forever." (Genesis 43:8-9)

Later, when the revelation of the silver goblet that Joseph concealed in Benjamin's sack threatens his promised return to Jacob, Judah, realizing the intense pain of losing two children, offers himself in his brother's stead, affirming the genuineness of his repentance and establishing his mature leadership. This act of assuming responsibility and self-sacrifice does not go unnoticed by his father Jacob, who designates Judah as the head of his generation. He blesses him with these words: "Judah, you are he whom your brothers shall praise. . . . Your father's children shall bow down before you. . . . The scepter shall not depart from Judah. . ." (Genesis 49:8-10).

Taking Responsibility

From Judah's loins came other leaders who assumed responsibility for their actions, including David. The prophet Nathan confronts David by telling him the parable of the poor man and the ewe. David deeply repents (II Samuel 2:13; Psalm 51) and expresses willingness to endure the consequences.

David's Offspring, Jesus of Nazareth, not only assumes the responsibility for His own behavior, but also the awesome responsibility of our sins and transgressions:

Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed. (Isaiah 53:4-5)

Like his maternal grandfather Judah, Jesus offers His life as surety for the transgressions of His brethren, truly becoming in the full sense of the word His brother's keeper.

As regenerated brothers and sisters of Christ, we ought—as a minimum—to take responsibility for our own behaviors and accept the consequences. Though this is not an easy thing to do, it is in the end the best course of action. We have the assurances of God's Word:

» Proverbs 28:13: He who covers his sins will not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy.

» I John 1:8-9: If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Following Judah, David, and Christ's example, when it comes to sins and personal transgressions, we must, like Harry Truman, mentally place a sign at the front of our desk, "The Buck Stops Here." After that, we must stand solidly behind it and put it to work every day. When this happens, we will begin to take real steps toward Christian growth.