

Ezekiel 17    “The Vine and the Cedar”  
Psalm 92  
Romans 11

September 12, 2010

Children,  
do you remember where Ezekiel is?

Ezekiel is in Babylon.

Ezekiel was from Jerusalem – he had been training for the priesthood.

He was a descendent of Aaron!

But Ezekiel and most of the leaders in Jerusalem

had been taken captive by Nebuchadnezzar in 597 BC,  
together with King Jehoiachin,

and forced to march all the way to Babylon.

That’s a thousand miles.

And if your father had been one of those leaders who was deported,  
then *you* would have walked a thousand miles.

As a matter of fact,

if you had left from Jerusalem back when we started this series on Ezekiel,  
way back in the middle of June,

you might have arrived in Babylon by now!

If you walked 15 miles a day every day, allowing for a day of rest here and there,  
you could walk 1000 miles in 80 days.

Ezekiel describes this as an eagle carrying a cedar crown to a city of merchants.

Soaring through the air, being carried across the desert by an eagle –

or being forced to march through the heat and sand for a 1000 miles!

Ezekiel has an interesting way of describing this!

But of course, he too marched those thousand miles.

And now you’re in exile – in the city of merchants.

Now, it is five years later.

Your king, Jehoiachin (now 23 years old), is still held captive in Babylon.

At first, for more than four years you waited, wondering,

“will God restore us?”

“will God let us go home?”

And then on July 31, 593 BC, Ezekiel had a vision of the glory of the LORD in Babylon.

And God told him to “go to the rebellious house” –

Go to “Jerusalem in Babylon”

and tell them that judgment is coming upon Jerusalem.

You had always thought that as long as the temple in Jerusalem was standing,

there was still hope.  
And yet Ezekiel has told you of his vision of the temple in Jerusalem (chapters 8-11)  
and how the idolatry of Jerusalem has reached the point  
that the glory of the LORD has departed from the temple.

And Ezekiel told you that the glory of the LORD returned with him to Babylon.  
God said that he would be a sanctuary to the exiles!  
But before you had a chance to think too highly of yourself,  
Ezekiel warned you of your own idolatry (ch 14).

Ezekiel is an equal opportunity prophet!

Everyone comes under the sledgehammer of judgment:  
the temple in Jerusalem will be destroyed –  
the remnant of Jerusalem will be worthless –  
and while Jerusalem in exile will *eventually* be the means God uses  
to restore worship in Jerusalem,  
at the moment, you are just as bad as everyone else!

There *is* a remnant.  
But there is *no* faithful remnant!

As we saw in Ezekiel 16, God himself will have to atone for all that Jerusalem has done –  
and today in Ezekiel 17, God himself will have to make the cedar tree flourish.

Jerusalem cannot save herself.  
Only God can save.

And that is the point of our Psalm of response – Psalm 92 –  
a Psalm that highlights God's sovereignty in salvation.

Sing Psalm 92  
Read Romans 11

It's not a cedar tree – and it's not a vine –  
but Paul's use of the olive tree in Romans 11  
helps us understand how we are connected to Ezekiel's cedars.

In Ezekiel, the nations will come to know that Yahweh is God.  
In Ezekiel the nations will come to dwell in the shelter of the House of David.  
But Ezekiel 17 does not yet help us to see how *we* are connected to the cedar.

I want to start today by pointing you beyond Ezekiel's vision  
so that you can see where it is going.

God's purpose in history is not merely to establish the kingdom of Christ,  
so that Christ rules over all things.

God's purpose in history is that we might be his people –  
and God himself would be with us as our God.

This is why the language of adoption, sonship, inheritance runs through all God's covenants.  
Romans 11 shows us that *in Christ* we have been grafted into the one olive tree.  
We have been made partakers of the “nourishing root” – the life of Jesus Christ.

And there is a warning that comes with this:

God broke off the natural branches in order to graft you in.

(Paul considers Jews who reject the gospel to be “broken branches.”)

There is only one olive tree – there is only one people of God –  
and so those Jews who reject the Messiah are broken off,  
in order to include the Gentiles in this one people of God.

But Paul says that if God could break off the natural branches,  
how much more can he break you off, if you do not stand fast through faith?

So there is a challenge for you!

How do you stand fast through faith?

How do you “continue in his kindness”?

This is why it is so useful for us to study Ezekiel!

Remember that more than a third of the Bible is about the Exile.

The Exile is all about *why* God cut people off –  
and Ezekiel 17 provides a clear explanation of *what exactly*  
God expects of his people.

Part of the reason why I am preaching through Ezekiel right now  
is so that *you* will learn how to read the prophets –  
so that you can understand what is going on in the Exile,  
and therefore, *use* this third of the Bible in your own family and individual worship.

### **1. The Parable of the Cedar, the Vine, and the Two Eagles (v1-10)**

*17:1 The word of the Lord came to me: 2 “Son of man, propound a riddle, and speak a parable to the house of Israel;*

The structure of chapter 17 of Ezekiel is pretty straightforward:  
there is the riddle, or parable, or “fable” of the two eagles,  
and then there is the interpretation.

A riddle is an enigmatic or perplexing statement.

Samson's riddle in Judges 14 is a good example of this,  
where he puts a enigmatic statement to the wedding guests.

The Queen of Sheba puts “riddles” to Solomon when she visits him (1 Kings 10:1)  
Proverbs 1:6 says that wisdom will help you understand the riddles of the wise.

So this is more than just a parable – more than just a fable –  
it is a riddle.

What is this riddle doing?

Let's start by looking at the eagle in verses 3-6.

**a. The First Eagle (v3-6)**

*3 say, Thus says the Lord God: A great eagle with great wings and long pinions, rich in plumage of many colors, came to Lebanon and took the top of the cedar. 4 He broke off the topmost of its young twigs and carried it to a land of trade and set it in a city of merchants. 5 Then he took of the seed of the land and planted it in fertile soil. He placed it beside abundant waters. He set it like a willow twig, 6 and it sprouted and became a low spreading vine, and its branches turned toward him, and its roots remained where it stood. So it became a vine and produced branches and put out boughs.*

The eagle of verse 3 is the greatest and most glorious of eagles.

He came to Lebanon and took the top of the cedar – Lebanon was famous for its cedars – and it would immediately cause the hearers to think of Solomon's temple, but also of Solomon's palace (and David's treaty with Hiram of Tyre, which procured sufficient quantities of cedar for the temple and palace).

The glorious eagle then took the cedar twig to a land of trade

and set it in a city of merchants (Babylon would come to mind pretty quick).

But this eagle is also a gardener.

He took a seed of the land and planted it in fertile soil,  
and placed it beside abundant waters,

and it sprouted and became a low spreading vine

(in other words, quite a contrast to the high growing cedar)

and the vine spread out towards the first eagle.

Now, especially in light of chapter 15 (Israel the vine),

this would make folks think of the Exodus,

when God brought his people (the vine – Psalm 80) on eagles' wings out of Egypt and planted them in the promised land.

So, are we talking about Babylon?

Or are we talking about the Exodus?

**b. The Second Eagle (v7-8)**

*7 "And there was another great eagle with great wings and much plumage, and behold, this vine bent its roots toward him and shot forth its branches toward him from the bed where it was planted, that he might water it. 8 It had been planted on good soil by abundant waters, that it might produce branches and bear fruit and become a noble vine.*

This is plainly a lesser eagle (not as rich in description) –

also this eagle is passive, he *does* nothing.

But the vine turns from the first eagle to the second,

turning away from all the good that the first eagle had done.

**c. Thus Says the LORD: It Will Wither (v9-10)**

*9 “Say, Thus says the Lord God: Will it thrive? Will he not pull up its roots and cut off its fruit, so that it withers, so that all its fresh sprouting leaves wither? It will not take a strong arm or many people to pull it from its roots. 10 Behold, it is planted; will it thrive? Will it not utterly wither when the east wind strikes it—wither away on the bed where it sprouted?”*

So the first eagle (at least, that would seem to be the “he” of verse 9) will come and uproot it.  
The vine cannot withstand the power of the east.

The east wind in verse 10 is the wind of judgment.  
If you go through the scriptures and look for the “east wind”  
you will see that it is invariably a destructive wind.  
And the reason is pretty obvious:  
in the middle east, the east wind is a hot dry wind  
that blows from the desert and blights everything in the land.

Also note that the second eagle is passive and cannot protect the vine from the first eagle –  
the vine’s course of action is worse than foolish, it is suicidal.

And by now (given Ezekiel’s past prophesies), the interpretation would be obvious:  
Zedekiah’s foreign policy is suicidal and his revolt against Babylon will fail,  
and Egypt will not rescue Jerusalem from the wrath of Nebuchadnezzar.

And in fact, this is precisely where Ezekiel goes in verses 11-18.

**2. The Interpretation of the Parable (v11-24)**  
**a. The First Eagle (v11-14)**

*11 Then the word of the Lord came to me: 12 “Say now to the rebellious house, Do you not know what these things mean? Tell them, behold, the king of Babylon came to Jerusalem, and took her king and her princes and brought them to him to Babylon. 13 And he took one of the royal offspring and made a covenant with him, putting him under oath (the chief men of the land he had taken away), 14 that the kingdom might be humble and not lift itself up, and keep his covenant that it might stand.*

So the first eagle is Nebuchadnezzar,  
and the cedar crown is Jehoiachin.  
And the “offspring” – the vine – is Zedekiah,  
whom Nebuchadnezzar put in Jehoiachin’s place.

This fits well with what we have seen of Ezekiel’s attitude toward Zedekiah.  
Back in chapter 12 Ezekiel referred to Zedekiah simply as “the prince.”  
Jehoiachin is the true king (even though he is in exile).  
Ezekiel is convinced that Zedekiah’s policy of seeking help from Egypt  
will end in ruin for Jerusalem.

### **b. The Second Eagle (v15)**

In verse 15, then, the second eagle is plainly revealed as Egypt – the passive eagle who does nothing.

*15 But he rebelled against him by sending his ambassadors to Egypt, that they might give him horses and a large army. Will he thrive? Can one escape who does such things? Can he break the covenant and yet escape?*

### **c. As I Live, Declares the Lord GOD: He Shall Die (v16-21)**

And so Zedekiah will go into captivity to Babylon, where he will die:

*16 “As I live, declares the Lord God, surely in the place where the king dwells who made him king, whose oath he despised, and whose covenant with him he broke, in Babylon he shall die. 17 Pharaoh with his mighty army and great company will not help him in war, when mounds are cast up and siege walls built to cut off many lives. 18 He despised the oath in breaking the covenant, and behold, he gave his hand and did all these things; he shall not escape.*

Just a little background:

in the ancient near east, there are lots of examples of “covenants.”

While there are different kinds of covenant,

the type we are looking at here is imposed by the Great King upon a lesser king that he has subdued.

When a Great King imposed a covenant upon his vassal,

there would be stipulations and rules for what the lesser king must do (as well as blessings for obedience – e.g., I will let you live! – and curses for disobedience – e.g., I will destroy you!)

2 Chronicles 36:13 indicates that Nebuchadnezzar made Zedekiah swear an oath, in the name of Yahweh, that he would be faithful.

God says that the king of Babylon is not going to tolerate the violation of the covenant, and therefore, the king of Babylon is going to bring the curses of the covenant upon Zedekiah.

But this is where it starts to get interesting.

Because in verse 19, Yahweh says that in breaking the covenant with Nebuchadnezzar Zedekiah has despised “my oath...and covenant”:

*19 Therefore thus says the Lord God: As I live, surely it is my oath that he despised, and my covenant that he broke. I will return it upon his head. 20 I will spread my net over him, and he shall be taken in my snare, and I will bring him to Babylon and enter into judgment with him there for the treachery he has committed against me. 21 And all the pick of his troops shall fall by the sword, and the survivors shall be scattered to every wind, and you shall know that I am the Lord; I have spoken.”*

Think about this for a minute.

God says that Zedekiah's breaking his covenant with Nebuchadnezzar  
is a breach of God's covenant.

How can this be?

How can breaking covenant with Babylon be breaking covenant with God?

First of all, Zedekiah swore in the name of Yahweh.

If you swear in the name of Yahweh – then *his honor* has been invoked.

If you break a vow that you made in the name of the Lord,  
then you are breaking *his covenant*.

God says that if you take an oath in his name,  
then you are bound *to him* to perform it.

And Jesus says that this applies to anything you say.

If you say that you are going to do something,  
let your yes be yes and your no be no.

If you promise to do something,  
then you must do it – even to your own hurt –  
even if you swore to a wicked king like Nebuchadnezzar!

Are you faithful to perform what you say you will do?

When you tell your boss – “I’ll have it by Wednesday” –  
do you do it? (to the best of your ability)

When you tell your wife, “I’ll be home by 7” –  
how faithful are you to your word?

When you tell your children that you will do something,  
do you keep your promise?

But what if you are forced to make a promise?

Well, that was precisely the situation Zedekiah was in.  
He didn't want to serve Nebuchadnezzar.

The scriptures regularly insist that you must keep your word,  
at whatever cost to yourself (cf. Psalm 15).

God says that when Zedekiah broke his promise to Nebuchadnezzar,  
he broke covenant with God.

Part of this is because of the “forgotten” cedar crown of verse 3.

Where is the cedar crown?

Jehoiachin is in exile *in Babylon*.

As long as the rightful king is exiled in Babylon

Jerusalem is bound to Babylon.

“Submission to Babylon is the price of national survival” (Mein, 90)

Zedekiah should be thinking of himself as a regent – as a prince –  
who rules temporarily until the king returns.

But this raises another question:

why does Ezekiel tell this parable?  
Zedekiah probably never heard it.  
Only the exiles *in Babylon* heard it.

what is the point *for Jerusalem in Babylon*?

Certainly, the point about keeping your word remains important.  
The exiles need to understand that as residents of Babylon  
they need to be faithful to their covenanted obligations to Babylon.

(And I would say that to you as well:  
as American citizens – or Canadian or Irish or whatever you are! –  
you need to take your obligations seriously,  
obeying those in authority, paying your taxes,  
and participating in the political process to the best of your ability.)

But also remember that Ezekiel 17 is not merely a parable –  
it is also called a riddle.

And like most riddles (like Samson’s riddle that he set for his wedding guests)  
this one may not be nearly so easy as it appears.

And indeed, there is another twist to this one.

Verses 22-24 are not so much a postscript to the riddle  
as they are a key to its proper interpretation!

**d. The Riddle’s Twist: A New Cedar Sprig (v22-24)**

*22 Thus says the Lord God: “I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar and will set it out. I will break off from the topmost of its young twigs a tender one, and I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. 23 On the mountain height of Israel will I plant it, that it may bear branches and produce fruit and become a noble cedar. And under it will dwell every kind of bird; in the shade of its branches birds of every sort will nest. 24 And all the trees of the field shall know that I am the Lord; I bring low the high tree, and make high the low tree, dry up the green tree, and make the dry tree flourish. I am the Lord; I have spoken, and I will do it.”*

Remember that first eagle – that benevolent eagle that provided for the cedar and the vine?

Who is the first eagle? (Babylon, right?)

And remember the vine imagery – that reminded us of Psalm 80?

Who is the vine? (isn’t it Zedekiah?)



We saw as we went through that there was a lot of Exodus imagery here.  
But the interpretation in verses 11-21 didn't really make use of it.  
Only in verses 22-24 do we see how the Exodus imagery was functioning.

Yes, the Babylonians will take Zedekiah captive –  
but it is *Yahweh* who will bring the covenant curses upon him!

Indeed, verses 20-21 explicitly say that *Yahweh* is the one who will overthrow Zedekiah.  
Zedekiah is not merely guilty of treason against Babylon –  
he has betrayed the LORD.

As Duguid says:

“It is not simply that breaking an oath lawfully taken is a serious matter.  
It is not even that the oath Zedekiah was forced to swear was taken in the Lord's name  
and therefore he would act as guarantor  
to bring into effect the covenant curses attached to it.  
It is that there is a fundamental *analogy* between Zedekiah's rebellion  
against his covenant overlord, Nebuchadnezzar,  
and Israel's rebellion against her covenant overlord, God himself.” (Duguid, 224)

In other words, there is a third level of meaning in this parable.  
There is the fable of the eagles, the cedar, and the vine.  
There is the interpretation centering on the nations and the rulers of Jerusalem.

But if all you see in Ezekiel 17 is the judgment that will come on Zedekiah  
for breaking his oath of allegiance to Nebuchadnezzar,  
then you will miss the most important point of the chapter:

Behind the first eagle is *Yahweh*.  
Behind Zedekiah is Israel.

Israel's abandonment of *Yahweh* is the fundamental problem.  
And the solution is when *Yahweh* himself will act.

And *Yahweh* says that he will take a new crown from the cedar of Lebanon,  
(a new Jehoiachin – a new Son of David)  
and plant it on the mountain height of Israel.

“I will take”

“I will plant”

A sprig from same cedar tree (the house of David) becomes the cosmic tree – the tree of life.

When does this happen?

It is easy to see how this points to Christ,

but we should see that this *begins* to take place with the coming of Zerubbabel  
and the restoration of the temple 70 years later.  
Calvin says well that “the reign of Christ” must be dated  
“from the period of the building of the temple  
after the people’s return from their seventy years’ captivity...  
through the whole progress of his kingdom. (207)

The restoration of the kingdom of God *began* with the Restoration of Jerusalem,  
and will only finally end with the coming of the heavenly Jerusalem.

Notice what sort of kingdom it is:

A new cedar will be planted –  
and this time by the LORD himself –  
and all the birds (think of the eagles of Babylon and Egypt)  
will be brought under its rule.

This is a universal kingdom –  
in which all the trees of the field (all the nations of the earth) –  
acknowledge that “I am Yahweh.”

And at the end of verse 24 the LORD says:

*I bring low the high tree, and make high the low tree,  
dry up the green tree, and make the dry tree flourish.*

If the trees symbolize the nations,  
then God is asserting his rule over all nations.

There was a time, only a few hundred years ago,  
when the Abbasid Caliphate of Baghdad was the most powerful nation on earth.

Charleston, South Carolina, was once the fourth largest city in North America.  
Bardstown, Kentucky, was once the premier city in the west.

Calvin rightly urges us not to trust our senses when it comes to the kingdom of Christ:

“since, if we cast our eyes round us,  
many things meet us which diminish and weaken our hope.  
For what is the outward appearance of Christ’s kingdom?  
In truth we shall feel nothing but despair if we judge of Christ’s kingdom  
by the present state of affairs.  
But when we see how the gospel creeps along the ground,  
this passage should come to our minds,  
that God will raise up the tree that is abject and contemptible.” (Calvin, 212)  
“Whatever happens, God has so established the kingdom of Christ alone,  
that it shall last as long as the sun and moon,  
but the other empires of the world shall vanish away with their own splendour,  
and their loftiness shall fall although at present they overtop the clouds.” (213)

Think about this in terms of politics:

Zedekiah thinks that political machinations will have good results for Israel.

Ezekiel says: that's not how God operates.

Jesus brings about a different sort of politics –  
a different sort of leadership –  
the way of the cross.

The weak and the humble – the foolish and the powerless –  
the poor and the downtrodden –  
these are the ones God will glorify.

The history of Christianity is a bizarre sort of history.

I cannot find any era in Christian history where the church did things “right.”

We are continually mucking things up!

We will not bring about the kingdom of God by following the politics of this age!

And that is why the last line of Ezekiel 17 is so important:

*I am Yahweh. I have spoken, and I will do it.*

Ezekiel may not have understood how the incarnation was going to work.

Ezekiel may not have realized that God himself was going to take to himself  
human flesh and blood, and *literally* do all that Israel had failed to do.

Almighty God, we give thanks to you for your gracious covenant with us which you have established by the blood of your only-begotten Son.

Make us mindful of our condition that we may always remember what we were when you adopted us as sons, and how often and how variously we have provoked you, and broken your covenant: Grant, also, that we may forever magnify your name by our humility, as we are conformed to the likeness of Christ in his suffering and death.

Heavenly Father, since you call us to mutual fidelity between man and man, help us, by your Holy Spirit, to conduct ourselves in every way that we may keep our promises, and assist one another with sincere love and faithfulness, and we pray that, by your grace, we might be so obedient to you, that we may experience you as a gracious Father to us, until we enjoy that eternal inheritance which you have prepared for us in heaven, for we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. [adapted from Calvin]