

EZEKIEL

Chapter 17

Parable of Two Eagles and a Vine

The word of the LORD came to me: 2 “Son of man, propound a riddle, and speak a parable to the house of Israel; 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. 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. 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?” 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. 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? 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. 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[c] 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.” 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.”

Ch 17 Builds on events of Ezekiel’s time. In vv 1–10, the history is related allegorically; vv 11–24 interpret the allegory. The interpretation may be subdivided into three parts: (1) the historical meaning of the allegory (vv 11–18), (2) its theological meaning (vv 19–21), and (3) its messianic application (vv 22–24). (TLSB)

This chapter is more specifically anchored in current political events (Zedekiah’s rebellion) than anything in the book so far, and its contents indicate that it must have been uttered (and probably written) not long before the actual fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C., but it is impossible to be more precise than that. It is also noteworthy that, for the first time in the book, we meet specifically “messianic” prophecy in the narrow, that is, royal sense of that word (17:22–24). (CC)

17:2 *riddle ... parable*. The two nouns are similar in meaning, but not entirely synonyms. A riddle implies any saying or story that requires interpretation. A parable implies a comparison of one thing with another. (TLSB)

17:3 *great eagle*. Nebuchadnezzar (see v. 12). (CSB)

Lebanon. Jerusalem (see v. 12). (CSB)

Greater Canaan, the northward, coastal extension of traditional Israelite territory. That name is chosen because of its prized species of cedar trees. (TLSB)

cedar. David’s dynasty; his royal family. (CSB)

Here, the tree must represent Jerusalem in southern Canaan. (TLSB)

17:4 *topmost of its twigs*. Jehoiachin. (CSB)

Reference to the deportation of Jehoiachin (with Ezekiel) to Babylon in 597 BC and the installation of Zedekiah in his stead. Babylon, with the surrounding area, was known as a major trade emporium (cf 16:29). (TLSB)

city of merchants. The country of Babylonia (see v. 12; 16:29). (CSB)

17:5 *seed*. Zedekiah son of Josiah; he was the brother of Jehoahaz and Jehoiakim and uncle of Jehoiachin (see 2Ki 23–24). (CSB)

set it like a willow twig. Willow grows rapidly along streams. The picture changes here: the eagle has become a gardener. It means Zedekiah is established in Jerusalem and could have thrived there. (TLSB)

planted it. Made him king (2Ki 24:17). (CSB)

17:6 Another transformation. The vine is Zedekiah in Jerusalem. (TLSB)

low, spreading vine. No longer a tall cedar, because thousands of Judah’s leading citizens had been deported (see 2Ki 24:15–16; see also Jer 52:28). (CSB)

Because of the intense summer heat, Near Eastern grapevines are often trained to hug the ground. (TLSB)

17:7 *another great eagle.* An Egyptian pharaoh, either Psammetichus II (595–589 B.C.) or Hophra (589–570). Hophra, mentioned in Jer 44:30, is probably the pharaoh who offered help to Jerusalem in 586 (see Jer 37:5). If the fact that ch. 17 is located between ch. 8 (dated 592) and ch. 20 (dated 591) is chronologically meaningful, Psammetichus is meant. (CSB)

Representing Egypt's Twenty-sixth Dynasty, probably under Pharaoh Hophra (cf Jer 44:30) or his predecessor, who encouraged Zedekiah to revolt and promised assistance. (TLSB)

bent out its roots toward him. Zedekiah appealed to Egypt for military aid (v. 15), an act of rebellion against Nebuchadnezzar (see 2Ki 24:20). (CSB)

The vine (Zedekiah) responded favorably and sought water (support) from Egypt. (TLSB)

17:8. Nebuchadnezzar had planted Jerusalem on good, well-watered soil so that, as a noble vine, it could bear fruit without turning to Egypt. As v 23 will indicate, it was God's will for that vine to thrive under the first eagle (Babylon), but the vine's defection forced God to respond in a different way. (TLSB)

17:9 *Will it thrive?* Rhetorical question. Zedekiah and Jerusalem would certainly feel God's wrath for their unfaithfulness. (TLSB)

17:10 *east wind.* The hot, dry wind known as the khamsin, which withers vegetation (see 19:12). Here it stands for Nebuchadnezzar and his Babylonian forces. (CSB)

The rhetorical question (v 9) is now restated in terms of surviving the hot, dry winds that blow from the eastern desert. (TLSB)

17:12 *what these things mean?* Here begins the prophet's own explanation. Until v 19, the explanation is historical; then he predicts the future. (TLSB)

king of Babylon came to Jerusalem. The invasion of 597 BC. (TLSB)

17:13 *royal offspring.* Jehoiachin's uncle Mattaniah, named Zedekiah by Nebuchadnezzar. (TLSB)

covenant ... oath. A treaty or pact was normally sealed by an oath, a promise of fealty by the vassal and of protection by the overlord. (TLSB)

chief men of the land. Summarizes the scope of the 597 BC deportation. (TLSB)

17:14 By taking captive Jerusalem's ruling classes, the city might not be tempted to rebel. (TLSB)

17:15 *sending his ambassadors to Egypt.* Zedekiah did rebel in response to Egypt's promises. (TLSB)

horses and a large army. Historical evidence indicates that when Nebuchadnezzar returned, Egypt's contribution was relatively small and ineffectual. (TLSB)

Will he break the treaty and yet escape? The point of the chapter (see vv. 16, 18). (CSB)

17:16 *he shall die in Babylon.* See 2Ki 25:7. (CSB)

Fulfilled (cf Jer 52:11). (TLSB)

17:17 Pharaoh Hophra's effort to help Zedekiah proved to be a failure. (TLSB)

mounds ... siege walls. Standard features of ancient sieges of cities. (TLSB)

17:19–21 Ezekiel turns to a more theological explanation of the consequences of Zedekiah's actions. The Lord says that He will see to it that the punishment is carried out. On breach of covenant, cf 16:59; 44:7. (TLSB)

17:19 *my oath ... my covenant.* The king of Judah would have sworn faithfulness to the treaty in the name of the Lord. To swear such an oath and then violate it was to despise God. (CSB)

17:22–24 A messianic prophecy spoken to a descendant of David, to whom the prophet Nathan promised an everlasting kingdom (2Sm 7). (TLSB)

17:22 *Lord God* – This combines the image of a loving God who keeps his promises with a God who also has the wherewithal to get the job done. (CSB)

says - To speak with authority, even demand. This continues the power theme begun with the words "Sovereign Lord." (CSB)

I myself.† A beautiful Messianic promise follows, using the previous imagery in a prophetic way. (CSB)

The first person singular pronoun 'ani is emphatic: "I myself" will take and plant. Though these events are concerned with the political rise and fall of nations, there is no doubt who is ultimately in control of human history. (Concordia Pulpit Resources - Volume 19, Part 3)

The kings of Israel had made a mess of things by going to Egypt for help instead of God when they went against Nebuchadnezzar. Now God would take over and get the job done right. (CC)

By the repeated, emphatic "I myself" and the contrast with the machinations of the two eagles, Yahweh puts great accent on the antithesis between his free divine action and all human activity. What he promises is not the result of some new and clever human plan, but solely a new, free act of God in faithfulness to his ancient promises. (CC)

sprig. A member of David's family (cf. Isa 11:1; Zec 3:8; 6:12). (CSB)

The kingdom of God, which came in a way beyond what OT believers would know; the NT describes the fulfillment, and the Church still awaits its final fruition. (TLSB)

Unique expression but one probably ultimately derived from the common description of the Messiah as a branch or shoot (cf Is 11:1; Jer 23:5; Zec 3:8). One could think of Jesus' virginal birth as a tiny infant, though this may press the figure too far. (TLSB)

His weakness and vulnerability are most evident in His crucifixion. (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 4, Part 3)

the topmost of its young twigs. As (in v 4) Nebuchadnezzar is figuratively described as breaking the top twigs (i.e., Jehoiachin, the legitimate king and of Davidic descent), so in the messianic era the Lord God will do something comparable (although on a vastly higher plane). (TLSB)

The foliage of the highest or top branches. This is the Messiah.

Isaiah 11:1 “A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.”

Isaiah 53:2 “He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.”

Jeremiah 23:5-6 “The days are coming,” declares the LORD, ‘when I will raise up To David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The LORD Our Righteousness.’”

cedar. A return to the original imagery of the parable. (TLSB)

As a cedar was the most renowned among the trees, so the dynasty of David was the most illustrious of their princely families. Of this ancestral tree should the Messiah spring. (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 4, Part 3)

This was the most famous of trees in that area. The lumber from it was used to build palaces, temples and ship masts. It represented strength and majesty.

Break – To strip or crop something from a plant. (CSB)

plant it. Make him king (see v. 5). (CSB)

To transplant something

high and lofty mountain. Jerusalem. (CSB)

Cf v 24. Zion (Jerusalem) was situated on a small mountain, but this messianic abode far transcends earthly geography. Cf Ps 48:1–2; Is 11:9; 25:6–8. It can scarcely be accidental that high mountains figure so prominently in the NT (e.g., the scene of our Lord’s temptations [Mt 4:1–11], the unnamed mount of transfiguration [Mt 17:1–13], and the new Jerusalem [Rv 21:2, 10]). Ezekiel will also describe the new temple of a restored Israel on “a very high mountain” (Ezk 40:2). (TLSB)

This is from which the Davidic King would rule and is a reference to Mount Zion, the mountain on which the temple stood, and thus a reference on to the modern church. It is the place where God administers His kingdom of grace through Word and Sacrament. Through these means God “lifts up” His people to the heights of heaven. (2:2; Micah 4:1) (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 4, Part 3)

17:23 *bear branches and produce fruit* - Where there is a faith there will also be evidence of that faith in the form of spiritual fruit. (James 2:14-19) See also Galatians 5:22-23; Ephesians 5:9; and Hebrews 12:11. This connects well with John 15:1-8 where Jesus talks about the Vine and the branches. (CSB)

Cedars don't bear fruit. The miraculous reversal here is expressed in ultranatural terms. God is doing something unexpected and impossible. Along with the formulaic expressions at the beginning and the end of this section ("Thus says the Lord God" in v 22; "I am the Lord; I have spoken, and I will do it" in v 24), the power and activity of God is brought to the fore. God can do whatever he wants. (Concordia Pulpit Resources - Volume 19, Part 3)

birds of every sort will nest. Symbolizing people of all nations. (TLSB)

Symbols of shelter, which the Lord provides to those who take refuge in His chosen servant. (TLSB)

The portrayal of the church as a place of refuge for "birds over every sort" (i.e. all people, Jew and Gentile alike; Rom 11:11-24) is affirmed by Jesus in Mark 4:32). (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 4, Part 3)

17:24 *bring low* – The theme of the "great reversal" is one of the most prominent Law/Gospel themes that span both testaments: God brings down the high and proud, but exalts the lowly; He dries up the green, but gives life and growth to those were dead. God kills with His Law in order to give resurrection life through the Gospel. The "great reversal" theme is particularly prominent in the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55) and Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12). (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 4, Part 3)

bring low the high tree...make high the low tree – The reference is to the subjugation of David's kingdom during the Babylonian captivity. (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 4, Part 3)

The nations will either bow in sincere faith or break in humiliation (cf Php 2:10–11). (TLSB)

The punch line of this whole chapter is a proverbial statement that sums up not only how God is working in this context but about how God works in general: "I bring low the high tree, and make high the low tree, dry up the green tree, and make the dry tree flourish." (Concordia Pulpit Resources - Volume 19, Part 3)

If God's action brings down the high tree and makes the low tree high, the theological question for the hearer is, am I a high or low tree? This verse is both Law and Gospel: which one applies to me? External evidence is no sure sign because God is often working in hidden ways. We can only understand ourselves and our hearers as the low, dry tree that is being made high and green because we have other promises from God: "I baptize you in the name" (*LSB*, p. 270), "shed for the forgiveness of your sins" (*LSB*, p. 164), "I . . . announce the grace of God unto all of you" (*LSB*, p. 185), for example. (Concordia Pulpit Resources - Volume 19, Part 3)

Christ and the sinner changing places, as it were, so that none may boast but confess that it was all pure grace (cf Lk 1:46–55; 1Co 1–2). (TLSB)

green tree – This represents the splendor of David’s kingdom. (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 4, Part 3)

dry tree flourish – That the promised Messiah came from this now-low and now-dry tree identified by Isaiah (11:1) as a “stump,” underscores God’s grace and power. God creates from nothing, and give growth to that which is dead. (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 4, Part 3)

I am the Lord, I have spoken and I will do it – No matter how much we have left Him out of our lives, He is never far away. Just the opposite. His love and His promises remove the sin, lives and hearts. We are not so unlike the people of 2500 years ago. Like them we tend to follow our sinful desires. Human nature doesn’t change. The good news is that God hasn’t changed either! His love is everlasting. (PBC)

Ch 17 An allegory describes Nebuchadnezzar’s placement of Zedekiah over Jerusalem and the deportation of the rightful king, Jehoiachin. Ezekiel builds a glorious picture of God establishing His eternal kingdom in a descendant of David (and Jehoiachin): the Messiah. Ezekiel also describes how God makes a new creation for you, established through Christ’s birth, life, death, and resurrection. • Lord, avert our eyes of faith from the kingdom of this world with its politics and power struggles. Show us the kingdom of heaven that You have already established. Sustain us on our journey to the high mountain above. Amen. (TLSB)