

The Book of Ezekiel, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 7: The Eagles, the Vine, and the Soul That Sins

Ezekiel 17:1-18:32

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

The teacher should first establish the seriousness with which God regards covenants, oaths, and His own sovereign rule over the nations. In chapter 17 Zedekiah's treachery against Babylon was treachery against God, for the oath had been sworn in God's name; God says it is My oath that has been despised. Connect this to the truth that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom He will (Daniel 4:17). Then turn to the bright promise of 17:22-24, the tender twig God Himself plants that becomes a noble cedar. Show that this is Messianic, the kingdom God raised out of the fallen house of David, and insist that it is fulfilled in the present reign of Christ over His church, the mountain of the Lord's house already established, not in some future earthly throne. Birds of every sort sheltering in its branches picture people of every nation finding refuge in the kingdom now.

The doctrinal heart of the lesson is chapter 18 and its insistence on personal accountability. The teacher must drive home God's words, the soul who sins shall die, and the son shall not bear the iniquity of the father (18:4, 20). This passage is a direct biblical refutation of the doctrine of inherited guilt, the teaching that every person is born already guilty of Adam's sin and totally depraved from birth. Scripture nowhere teaches that we inherit Adam's guilt. We inherit a world marked by sin and death, and we all in time sin ourselves and so deserve death (Romans 5:12, where death spread to all because all sinned), but each person is answerable for his own sin, not condemned for another's. The teacher should present the consequences of the fall, real death entering the world, real bent toward temptation, real spiritual ruin when we sin, while being careful never to teach the Augustinian and Calvinistic notion of inherited guilt or total depravity that leaves the sinner unable to respond to God. Ezekiel 18 assumes the opposite: the wicked can turn and live.

Finally, the teacher should let the chapter's appeal land on every heart. God walks through case after case to show that the wicked who repents lives and the righteous who turns to sin dies, so that no one may presume on the past and no one need despair of it. The capstone is God's own heart laid bare, I have no pleasure in the death of anyone; turn, and live, and His command, make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit (18:31-32). Show that this new heart is given to those who turn to God in obedient faith, fulfilled in the new birth of water and the Spirit and the newness of life that follows baptism into Christ (Romans 6:3-7). The lesson should close not in cold doctrine but in the warm, urgent call of a God who pleads with sinners to repent and live.

Question 1

Student Question:

In Ezekiel 17:1–10 God sets forth the riddle of the two eagles and the vine. As God Himself interprets it in 17:11–21, what political treachery is being condemned, and what does God mean when He says of Zedekiah’s broken oath, It is My oath that he has despised and My covenant that he has broken?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

God tells Ezekiel to put forth a riddle and speak a parable to the rebellious house (17:2). A great eagle with great wings came to Lebanon and took the highest branch of the cedar, cropping off its topmost shoot and carrying it to a city of merchants (17:3–4). Then he took of the seed of the land and planted it as a willow by abundant waters, where it grew into a low, spreading vine whose branches turned toward him (17:5–6).

A second great eagle appears, and the vine bends its roots and stretches its branches toward this one, hoping he might water it, though it was already planted in good soil by abundant waters (17:7–8). The riddle ends with a question: shall it thrive? Will it not utterly wither when the east wind strikes it (17:9–10)?

God Himself interprets the parable so there can be no mistake. The first eagle is the king of Babylon, who came to Jerusalem and carried off its king and princes (17:12). The cropped twig is Jehoiachin taken into exile. The vine planted in good soil is Zedekiah, whom Babylon set up as a vassal king under a covenant and oath (17:13–14).

The second eagle is Egypt, to whom Zedekiah treacherously turned, sending ambassadors for horses and a great army (17:15). The whole riddle thus exposes a real and recent act of political treachery, Zedekiah’s rebellion against Babylon in violation of a sworn covenant, and sets up the heart of the chapter, the breaking of an oath taken in the name of God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God speaks the message as a riddle and parable to His rebellious people.
- The first eagle is Babylon, who carried off Jehoiachin, the cropped twig.
- The planted vine is Zedekiah, set up as a vassal under covenant.
- The second eagle is Egypt, to whom Zedekiah treacherously turned.
- The riddle exposes a real act of covenant-breaking treachery.

Discussion Prompts

- What do the two eagles and the vine represent?
- How does God’s own interpretation guard against misreading the riddle?
- What political treachery is the parable condemning?

Question 2

Student Question:

Zedekiah broke a solemn oath he had sworn, and God held him accountable for it (Ezekiel 17:18–19). How seriously do you treat the commitments and promises you have made, both to God and to others, and where do you need to keep faith more carefully?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

God presses the verdict in 17:11–21. Zedekiah had taken an oath of loyalty to the king of Babylon and bound himself by covenant, yet he rebelled and sent to Egypt for help (17:15). God asks, Shall he prosper? Shall he escape who does such things? Shall he break the covenant and yet escape (17:15)?

The answer is plain. As surely as God lives, Zedekiah shall die in Babylon, in the land of the king who set him up, whose oath he despised and whose covenant he broke (17:16). Pharaoh and all his army will be no help to him when the siege comes (17:17). He despised the oath by breaking the covenant, and he shall not escape (17:18).

Then God reveals the deepest dimension of the offense. My oath that he has despised, and My covenant that he has broken, I will recompense upon his own head (17:19). Because the loyalty oath to Babylon had been sworn in the name of the LORD, breaking it was not merely political treachery but treachery against God Himself. God will spread His net over Zedekiah and bring him to Babylon for judgment (17:20).

The lesson is that God takes oaths and covenants with utter seriousness, even an oath sworn to a pagan king. Faith broken with men, when sworn before God, is faith broken with God. This stands as a sober warning against treating our promises and commitments lightly, for the God in whose name we make them holds us to them.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Zedekiah broke a sworn covenant by rebelling and seeking Egypt's aid.
- God declares he shall not escape but die in Babylon.
- The oath sworn in God's name made it God's oath that was despised.
- Breaking faith with men sworn before God is breaking faith with God.
- God holds men accountable for the commitments they make.

Discussion Prompts

- Why does God call Zedekiah's broken oath My oath and My covenant?
- How does this show the seriousness with which God regards commitments?
- What warning does this hold for the promises we make?

Question 3

Student Question:

In Ezekiel 17:22–24 God promises to take a tender twig and plant it on a high mountain so that it becomes a noble cedar sheltering birds of every sort. How does this promise reach beyond Zedekiah to the Messianic hope, and how is it fulfilled in the kingdom Christ reigns over now rather than in a future earthly throne?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

After the dark verdict, God speaks His own bright promise in 17:22–24. 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. Where men's planting withered, God's planting will stand.

The tender twig becomes a noble cedar bearing fruit, under which dwell birds of every sort, nesting in the shade of its branches (17:23). The picture is of a kingdom that gives shelter to people of every kind, not the cramped and bending vine of human politics but a majestic tree established by God's own hand.

This is the Messianic hope shining through the ruin of the house of David. Out of the felled royal line God promised to raise a King and a kingdom, the shoot from the stump of Jesse on whom the Spirit rests (Isaiah 11:1–10). Jesus took up this very imagery when He likened the kingdom to a mustard seed that becomes a tree in which the birds nest (Matthew 13:31–32).

We must read this as fulfilled in the present reign of Christ over His church, not as a future earthly throne. The mountain of the LORD's house is already established as the highest of mountains, and Christ reigns now over a kingdom into which people of every nation are gathered for shelter. The noble cedar is not a coming political Israel but the living kingdom of God's Anointed, already standing in the world.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God Himself plants the tender twig that men could never plant.
- The twig becomes a noble cedar sheltering birds of every sort.
- This is the Messianic hope rising out of the fallen house of David.
- Jesus applied the same imagery to the kingdom of God.
- The promise is fulfilled in Christ's present reign over His church, not a future earthly throne.

Discussion Prompts

- How does the tender twig reach beyond Zedekiah to the Messiah?
- Why should we read the noble cedar as Christ's present kingdom?
- What does it mean that birds of every sort find shelter in it?

Question 4

Student Question:

God says He brings low the high tree and makes the low tree flourish (Ezekiel 17:24). How have you seen God humble the proud and lift up the lowly, and how should the certainty that He does what He says move you to trust and humble obedience?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

God seals the promise with a declaration of His sovereign power: 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 (17:24). What God says, He performs.

This is the same truth Daniel learned, that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom He will (Daniel 4:17). God humbles the proud and exalts the lowly, overturning the schemes of kings and raising up what men count as nothing. The high tree of human pride is brought low; the dry tree of God's despised people is made to flourish.

For us this is both a humbling and a comforting truth. It humbles us, for it warns against every proud confidence in our own height and strength, which God can bring low in a moment. It comforts us, for the lowly who trust in God are the very ones He delights to lift up, and His promise to do so is as certain as His word.

The proper response is trust and humble obedience. Because God does what He says, we can rest our lives on His promises and need not grasp after our own exaltation. We humble ourselves under His mighty hand, knowing that in due time He lifts up those who are low before Him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God brings low the high tree and makes the low tree flourish.
- The Most High rules and gives the kingdom to whom He will.
- This truth humbles the proud and comforts the lowly.
- What God speaks He certainly performs.
- The fitting response is trust and humble obedience.

Discussion Prompts

- How have you seen God humble the proud and lift the lowly?
- Why should the certainty of God's word lead to trust?
- What does humble obedience look like in your life?

Question 5

Student Question:

In Ezekiel 18:1–4 God rejects the proverb about the fathers eating sour grapes and declares, Behold, all souls are Mine; the soul who sins shall die. What does this teach about personal

accountability before God, and why does it overturn the idea that we are punished for sins we did not commit?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Chapter 18 opens by confronting a proverb the exiles loved to repeat: The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge (18:2). By it they claimed they were suffering for their fathers' sins, that God was unjust in punishing them for what others had done. It was a way of dodging responsibility and accusing God of unfairness.

God forbids the use of this proverb in Israel ever again (18:3). Then He grounds His answer in His own ownership of every life: Behold, all souls are Mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is Mine (18:4). Every person stands in direct relation to God, not buried under the chain of his ancestors.

From that ownership flows the great principle: The soul who sins shall die (18:4). God deals with each person according to that person's own life. He does not punish the innocent for the guilty, nor charge one man's sin to another's account. Each soul belongs to God and answers to God for itself.

This overturns the idea that we are punished for sins we did not commit. The exiles wanted to blame their fathers; God insists they reckon with their own sin. The doctrine of personal accountability is established here at the outset, and the whole chapter unfolds to demonstrate it case by case.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The exiles used a proverb to blame their fathers and accuse God.
- God forbids the proverb and declares all souls are His.
- Each person stands in direct relation to God.
- The soul who sins shall die, judged for his own life.
- We are not punished for sins we did not commit.

Discussion Prompts

- What were the exiles claiming by the proverb of sour grapes?
- How does God's ownership of all souls answer that complaint?
- What does the soul who sins shall die establish about accountability?

Question 6

Student Question:

The exiles were blaming their fathers for their own troubles (Ezekiel 18:2). In what ways are you tempted to shift the blame for your sin onto others, and how does owning your own accountability before God change the way you live?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The exiles were blaming their fathers for their troubles (18:2), and the same instinct lives in every heart. It is far easier to trace our failures to our upbringing, our circumstances, or the people who wronged us than to own them as our own. But God strips away every excuse and sets each soul before Him to answer for itself.

Blame-shifting is as old as Eden, where Adam blamed Eve and Eve blamed the serpent. It feels like relief, but it is a trap, for as long as the fault lies with someone else, there is nothing for us to repent of and no way forward. Owning our sin is painful but freeing, because only what we own can be confessed and forsaken.

The personal work is to stop excusing and start owning. Our background may explain much, but it does not absolve us. Before God we are each responsible for our own response, our own choices, our own sin. Taking that responsibility is the doorway to the repentance and change that God's whole appeal in this chapter is driving toward.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- It is natural to shift the blame for our sin onto others.
- Blame-shifting is as old as Eden and leaves no room for repentance.
- Our background may explain our sin but does not absolve it.
- Owning our sin is the doorway to confession and change.

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you tempted to blame others for your own sin?
- Why does blame-shifting block repentance?
- What changes when you take full responsibility before God?

Question 7

Student Question:

In Ezekiel 18:5–18 God walks through three generations, a righteous man, his violent son, and that son's righteous son, and judges each one according to his own life. What does this case study reveal about how God judges, and why does righteousness or wickedness not pass down as inherited guilt from father to son?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

To prove the principle, God walks through three generations. First, a righteous man who does what is lawful and right, does not oppress, gives bread to the hungry, walks in God's statutes; he shall surely live (18:5–9). His righteousness is real and brings life.

Second, this righteous man has a violent son who sheds blood, oppresses the poor, commits abominations; though his father was righteous, this son shall surely die, and his blood shall be upon himself (18:10–13). The father's righteousness does not save the son. Each is judged on his own life.

Third, this violent man has a son who sees all his father's sins and does not do likewise, but keeps God's statutes; this son shall not die for the iniquity of his father but shall surely live (18:14–18). The wicked father's guilt does not pass down to the righteous son.

The case study makes the point unmistakable: God judges each generation by its own conduct, not by inheritance. Righteousness does not transfer from father to son, and neither does guilt. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, nor the father the iniquity of the son (18:20). This is the heart of biblical personal accountability.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- A righteous man lives by his own righteousness.
- His violent son dies for his own sin despite the father's righteousness.
- The righteous grandson lives despite the father's wickedness.
- Righteousness does not transfer, and neither does guilt.
- God judges each generation by its own conduct.

Discussion Prompts

- What does the three-generation case study demonstrate?
- Why does the father's righteousness not save the wicked son?
- How does this overturn the idea of inherited guilt?

Question 8

Student Question:

God says the wicked who turns from his sin shall live, while the righteous who turns to sin shall die (Ezekiel 18:21–24). How does this truth guard you against both despair over your past and presumption about your standing, and what does it demand of you today?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

God presses on to the hope and the warning bound up in personal accountability. If a wicked man turns from all his sins and keeps God's statutes, he shall surely live; none of his transgressions shall be remembered against him (18:21–22). The past does not seal a person's doom; the door of repentance stands open.

Conversely, if a righteous man turns from his righteousness and commits iniquity, none of his righteousness shall be remembered; in the sin he has committed he shall die (18:24). A good

past does not guarantee a good end. This is a sober word against presumption, and it stands squarely against the notion that one who is once righteous can never finally fall.

Here God adds the tender word that beats at the center of the chapter: Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord GOD, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live (18:23)? God is not eager to condemn; His heart longs for the sinner to repent and live.

This double truth guards us on both sides. It saves the sinner from despair, for no past is beyond the reach of repentance, and it saves the saint from presumption, for no standing excuses present sin. It calls us to turn today, neither paralyzed by what we have been nor complacent about what we are.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The wicked who repents will live and his sins be remembered no more.
- The righteous who turns to sin will die in that sin.
- A good past does not guarantee a good end.
- God has no pleasure in the death of the wicked but longs for repentance.
- This guards against both despair and presumption.

Discussion Prompts

- How does this truth free the sinner from despair?
- How does it guard the righteous against presumption?
- What does God's longing for the wicked to live reveal about Him?

Question 9

Student Question:

In Ezekiel 18:19–20 God declares, The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, nor the father the iniquity of the son; the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself. Drawing on the whole chapter, how does this passage establish that each person is answerable for his own sin and not condemned for the guilt of another, and how does this biblical doctrine of personal accountability stand against the false teaching that all are born guilty of Adam's sin and totally depraved from birth?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Here is the doctrinal summit of the lesson. God declares, The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, nor the father the iniquity of the son; the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself (18:20). Scripture could hardly be plainer: guilt is personal, not inherited. Each person answers to God for his own sin, and no one is condemned for the guilt of another.

This passage stands directly against the false teaching of inherited guilt, the doctrine that every infant is born already guilty of Adam's sin, totally depraved and under condemnation from the womb. Augustine taught it and Calvin systematized it, but Ezekiel 18 will not allow it. If the son does not bear the iniquity even of his own father, how much less is a newborn condemned for the sin of a distant ancestor? The whole chapter is built to deny exactly this. Babies are not born guilty; they are born innocent, for the soul that sins, and not the soul that is born, is the soul that dies.

We must be careful and biblical here. The fall was real and its consequences are real. Through Adam's sin, death entered the world and spread to all men, and it spread because all sinned (Romans 5:12). We are born into a world ruined by sin, with bodies that die and hearts that, as we grow, turn aside to sin so that all have sinned and fall short (Romans 3:23). But inheriting a fallen world and a mortal body is not the same as inheriting Adam's guilt. We die for our own sin, not for his.

Nor are we totally depraved in the Calvinistic sense, so corrupt from birth that we cannot respond to God. Ezekiel 18 assumes the very opposite. Again and again God calls the wicked to turn and live, which would be a cruel mockery if the sinner were incapable of turning. The biblical picture is real accountability before a God who pleads with sinners able to repent, not helpless puppets of an inherited guilt. Personal responsibility, not inherited condemnation, is the consistent teaching of Scripture, and Ezekiel 18:20 is its clearest single statement.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Guilt is personal, not inherited; the soul who sins shall die.
- The son does not bear the father's iniquity, nor the father the son's.
- Ezekiel 18 directly refutes inherited guilt and original sin.
- Infants are born innocent, not condemned for Adam's sin.
- The fall brought real death and a fallen world, but we die for our own sin.
- We are not totally depraved; God calls the wicked, who are able to turn and live.
- Romans 5:12 teaches death spread because all sinned, confirming personal accountability.

Discussion Prompts

- How does Ezekiel 18:20 establish that guilt is personal and not inherited?
- What is the difference between inheriting a fallen world and inheriting Adam's guilt?
- Why does God's repeated call to turn and live disprove total depravity?

Question 10

Student Question:

Ezekiel 18 closes with God pleading, I have no pleasure in the death of anyone; turn, and live, and calling His people to make themselves a new heart and a new spirit. Drawing the whole

lesson together, what one specific step is God calling you to take this week to turn from sin and respond to His earnest invitation to live?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The chapter closes with the appeal toward which everything has been moving. God says, As I live, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel (18:23, 32)? The judge of all the earth pleads with sinners not to perish.

Then comes the command that gathers up the chapter's hope: Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed, and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit (18:31). Personal accountability is not left as a bare burden; it is joined to a summons to be made new. God calls for repentance that reaches the heart.

Yet the command to make a new heart is not a demand to manufacture it from our own resources, for elsewhere God promises, I will give you a new heart (Ezekiel 36:26). The two stand together: we must turn and seek the new heart, and God supplies what He commands. This new heart and new spirit are given to those who come to God in obedient faith, and the new covenant fulfills it in the new birth of water and the Spirit and the newness of life that follows being buried with Christ in baptism (Romans 6:3-7).

Drawing the whole lesson together, the God who rules the nations and plants His kingdom in Christ is the God who holds each soul accountable and yet pleads with each one to live. The lesson ends not in cold doctrine but in a warm and urgent invitation. No one is trapped by his fathers' sins or his own past; the call is to turn today, receive the new heart God gives, and live.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked but calls all to turn and live.
- He commands His people to cast away sin and make a new heart and new spirit.
- The new heart is both commanded and given by God to those who turn to Him.
- It is fulfilled in the new birth and the newness of life in Christ.
- The lesson ends in God's urgent and tender invitation to repent and live.

Discussion Prompts

- What does God's plea reveal about His heart toward sinners?
- How can God both command and give the new heart?
- What step is God calling you to take to turn and live this week?