

The Book of Ezekiel

Lesson 7: The Eagles, the Vine, and the Soul That Sins -- Ezekiel 17:1–18:32

God tells Ezekiel to put forth a riddle and speak a parable to the house of Israel, and the picture He draws is vivid. A great eagle with broad wings and many feathers came to Lebanon, took the topmost twig of a cedar, and carried it to a land of trade. Then he took some of the seed of the land and planted it like a willow by abundant waters, and it grew into a low, spreading vine whose branches turned toward the eagle. But there was a second great eagle, and the vine bent its roots and stretched its branches toward this one instead, looking to him for water. The riddle is solemn, and God Himself unfolds it: the first eagle is the king of Babylon, the cropped twig is King Jehoiachin carried into exile, the planted vine is Zedekiah set up as a vassal king, and the second eagle is Egypt, to whom Zedekiah treacherously turned for help.

The heart of chapter 17 is a broken covenant. Zedekiah had sworn an oath to the king of Babylon, an oath taken in the name of God, and he broke it by rebelling and seeking Egypt's aid. God asks the searching question, Shall he break the covenant and yet escape? And the answer is no. Because Zedekiah despised the oath and broke the covenant, God says it is My oath that he has despised and My covenant that he has broken, and judgment will surely come. The passage teaches us that God takes oaths and covenants with utter seriousness, that He holds men accountable even for faith kept with a pagan king, and that treachery against a solemn vow is treachery against the God in whose name it was sworn.

Yet the chapter does not end in the wreckage of a broken vine. God adds His own promise: I Myself will take a tender twig from the topmost of the cedar and plant it on a high and lofty mountain, and it will become a noble cedar, and birds of every sort will nest in the shade of its branches. Where men planted vines that withered and bent toward false saviors, God will plant a kingdom that endures. This is the Messianic hope shining through the ruin, the promise that out of the felled house of David God would raise up His own King and His own kingdom, a kingdom that we know is the reign of Christ over His church, the mountain of the Lord's house established as the highest of all.

Then chapter 18 turns from kings to consciences and confronts a proverb the exiles were repeating: The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge. They were blaming their suffering on their ancestors, complaining that God was punishing them for sins not their own. God answers with a thunderous declaration of personal accountability: Behold, all souls are Mine; the soul who sins shall die. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, nor the father the iniquity of the son. Through case after case He drives home that each person stands answerable for his own life, that the wicked who repents shall live and the righteous who turns to sin shall die, and that God takes no pleasure in the death of anyone but pleads, Turn, and live. Make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit, for why will you die, O house of Israel?

Group Discussion: In Ezekiel 17 God plants a tender twig that becomes a noble cedar in which birds of every sort find shelter, a promise of the kingdom He Himself would raise up out of the fallen house of David. How does this Messianic picture help the church understand the present reign of Christ over His kingdom, and what does it mean that people of every sort find shelter in it now rather than waiting for some future earthly throne?

Personal Reflection: In Ezekiel 18 God refuses to let the exiles blame their fathers and insists that the soul who sins shall die and the soul who repents shall live. Where have you been tempted to excuse your own sin by blaming your upbringing, your circumstances, or others, and what would it look like to take full personal responsibility before God this week?

Read Ezekiel 17:1–18:32

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?

5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?

10. 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?

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Daniel 4:17, the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom He will, the very truth Ezekiel 17 presses about God bringing low the high tree and raising the low.; Isaiah 11:1–10, a shoot from the stump of Jesse on whom the Spirit rests, the Messianic branch over a kingdom of peace, illumining the tender twig God plants in Ezekiel 17:22–24.; Matthew 13:31–32, the kingdom as a mustard seed that becomes a tree in which the birds nest, echoing the noble cedar sheltering birds of every sort.; Romans 5:12, death spread to all men because all sinned, teaching that we die because of our own sin and not as bearers of Adam's personal guilt.; 2 Corinthians 5:10, each one must give account for the deeds done in the body, confirming the personal accountability Ezekiel 18 declares.

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