

“OF EAGLES, VINES, AND CEDARS”

**I. Introduction**

- A. Some of our most beloved stories contain elements that are characteristic of the fable, a tale in which animals and inanimate objects take on human characteristics.
1. C.S. Lewis’s Narnia stories have human beings interacting with the likes of Aslan the lion, Mr. and Mrs. Beaver, and Reepicheep the mouse.
  2. In *The Wind in the Willows*, the main characters are Mole, Rat, Badger, and Mr. Toad.
  3. And Tolkien’s tales of Middle Earth feature talking spiders, a malevolent willow tree, and a group of ancient tree-ish characters known as Ents.
- B. The Bible sometimes employs literary features of this nature, and we see one example of this in Ezekiel 17.
1. The Lord instructs his prophet to convey an oracle to the people of Israel that begins as a fable involving two eagles, a vine, and a cedar tree.
  2. By using this device, the Lord captured his people’s attention and kept them wondering what this riddle was really about.
  3. The Lord did this in order to get them to listen, because their hearts were so hard that they ignored more direct forms of communication.
  4. Once he gets their attention with the parable that is set forth in the first part of this chapter, he moves on to give its meaning in the second part of the chapter.

5. As we study this passage today, we will see how it uses this symbolic story both to announce the judgment that was about to come upon Jerusalem and to declare that God's purpose to install his King on his holy hill will still come to fruition.

## II. The Low Spreading Vine

- A. In the first part of the riddle, a great eagle flies to Lebanon, breaks off the top of a cedar tree, carries it to a land of trade, and then plants a seed that grows into a low spreading vine.
  1. Lebanon was located just north of the Promised Land.
  2. It was famous for its beautiful trees, and it was a source of timber for nations where trees were scarce, nations like Babylon.
  3. Lebanon is mentioned here not because of any actual role that it plays in these events concerning God's people, but simply in order to complete the allegory.
- B. We are told later in the chapter that this first eagle is the king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, and that the eagle's actions are symbolic of Nebuchadnezzar's actions towards Israel.
  1. The cedar in the parable is symbolic of the line of David, whose royal palace was built out of the cedars of Lebanon.
  2. In 598 BC, Nebuchadnezzar took Israel's king and most of the leadership into captivity in Babylon.
  3. The vine planted by the eagle is symbolic of Zedekiah, a member of the royal family who was set up as puppet-king in Judah by the king of Babylon.
  4. At first, Zedekiah was loyal to Babylon, which is represented in the parable by the fact that the vine's branches initially turned toward the first eagle.

5. During this period, the nation enjoyed a measure of stability.
- C. There are a number of parallels between the actions of this great eagle and those of the Lord when he brought his people into the Promised Land.
1. Consider how Ezekiel 17 compares with this portion of Psalm 80:  
“You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land. The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches. It sent out its branches to the sea and its shoots to the River. Why then have you broken down its walls, so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit? The boar from the forest ravages it, and all that move in the field feed on it. Turn again, O God of hosts! Look down from heaven, and see; have regard for this vine, the stock that your right hand planted, and for the son whom you made strong for yourself. They have burned it with fire; they have cut it down; may they perish at the rebuke of your face! But let your hand be on the man of your right hand, the son of man whom you have made strong for yourself! Then we shall not turn back from you; give us life, and we will call upon your name!” (Ps. 80:8–18 ESV)
  2. There are too many similarities between these two passages to ignore.
  3. Both have a vine planted by a powerful figure, both have the vine initially growing but eventually being destroyed, and both end on a note of messianic hope.
  4. This indicates that in Ezekiel 17, the Lord is using Israel’s covenant unfaithfulness toward Babylon as a picture of their covenant unfaithfulness toward him.

### III. The Withered Vine

- A. This brings us to the second part of the parable, where reference is made to a second eagle.

1. We are told in verse 7 that the vine bent its roots toward this second eagle, seeking water from him instead of from the first eagle.
  2. Later in the chapter it is made clear that this second eagle is symbolic of Egypt's king, the Pharaoh.
  3. When Zedekiah grew weary of being subject to Nebuchadnezzar, he entered into an alliance with Pharaoh.
  4. Pharaoh was only too happy to enter into such an arrangement, since it made Judah a protective barrier between him and Babylon should the latter ever get the idea of expanding its rule further to the west.
- B. After describing all of this in the oracle, the Lord then declares the fate that will befall Judah for its covenant unfaithfulness.
1. He says that the vine will be easy to pull up when the east wind that blows in from the desert strikes it and dries it up.
  2. This is an image of the ease with which Babylon would destroy Jerusalem in 586 BC.
  3. In spite of Zedekiah's alliance with Egypt, Pharaoh did not send any help when Babylon invaded, as we are told in verse 17.
  4. As far as we know, the only thing that Judah received from Pharaoh were horses.
  5. But horses were not of any use when Babylon laid siege to Jerusalem, except perhaps as food.
  6. That was certainly not what Zedekiah would have had in mind when he obtained them.
- C. The Lord rebukes Zedekiah for breaking his covenant with Nebuchadnezzar.

1. Interestingly, the Lord refers to this covenant as “my oath” and “my covenant.”
  2. One reason why he speaks of it this way is because Zedekiah swore his oath with Babylon in Yahweh’s name, as we see in 2 Chronicles 36:13.
  3. Another reason is because the Lord stands as witness in all human treaties and covenants.
  4. Whenever people go back on what they have promised, they are not only sinning against the people to whom they made those promises, they are also sinning against the God who witnessed them make their promises.
- D. We should also note how the Lord speaks of the coming Babylonian assault in verse 20.
1. He says that he will spread his net over Zedekiah for the treachery that he committed against him.
  2. The Lord counts Zedekiah’s treachery against Nebuchadnezzar as treachery against himself.
  3. Furthermore, God describes Babylon’s assault on Jerusalem as his own action.
  4. The king of Babylon certainly did not think of himself as the Lord’s instrument, but in reality he was serving as God’s net.
  5. This reminds us that the Lord uses the wicked to accomplish his purposes.
  6. Babylon would be held to account for her wicked deeds in time.
  7. Eventually, God would unleash his judgment upon her.

8. But first, he used Babylon to bring judgment upon his unfaithful people.

#### IV. The Noble Cedar

- A. This brings us to the last paragraph in the chapter, and here we see a dramatic shift.
  1. The Lord declares that he himself will take a sprig from the top of the lofty cedar and plant it on a high and lofty mountain.
  2. And in that place, it will grow into a noble cedar, and birds of all kinds will find refuge in its branches.
  3. This is a promise of restoration from the coming exile.
  4. The Lord is telling Israel that he will bring them back and will give them a great king.
  5. The king is represented by the noble cedar tree, which comes from the same source as the cedar that the first eagle took into captivity.
  6. This tells us that this king will come from the line of David.
  7. This prophecy is similar to the messianic prophecy in Isaiah 11, where it says, "There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit."
  8. These promises ultimately point to Christ, since the monarchy was never restored in Israel after the return from exile.
  9. However, there was an initial, partial fulfillment of the promise when some of the Jews returned to the land under the Persians.
  10. Zerubbabel was the Davidic descendent whom the Persians set up as governor over Judea, and there is a sense in which he was the sprig planted by the Lord.

11. Yet it is clear that this promise only reaches its fulfillment in Christ's kingdom, the kingdom that encompasses all the earth and includes people from every tribe, tongue, and nation.
  12. The noble cedar is the Lord's anointed, the one set on God's holy hill, the one of whom it is said in Psalm 2: "Blessed are all who take refuge in him."
- B. We should also take note of what is said in verse 24 about the kingdom that is represented by the noble cedar.
1. God says, "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."
  2. The kingdoms of this world seem impressive for a time, and while the kingdom of Christ does not always seem very impressive, but the Lord will bring about a great reversal in his appointed time.
  3. This is similar to how Christ's estate of humiliation was followed by his estate of exaltation.
  4. Because he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death on a cross, God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow and every tongue confess that he is Lord.
  5. In the same way, the humble appearance of the kingdom that is represented by little Mount Zion will one day be shown to tower above all the kingdoms of the earth.
  6. As the writer of Hebrews reminds us in chapter 2 of that letter, at present we do not see all things in subjection to Christ.
  7. But one day we will.
  8. This leads John Calvin to write these words as he reflects upon this chapter of Ezekiel: "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... 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."

9. Let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken.