

# CHAPTER 17

God was, in the foregoing chapter, reckoning with the people of Judah, and bringing ruin upon them for their treachery in breaking covenant with him; in this chapter he is reckoning with the king of Judah for his treachery in breaking covenant with the king of Babylon; for when God came to contend with them he found many grounds of his controversy. The thing was now in doing: Zedekiah was practising with the king of Egypt underhand for assistance in a treacherous project he had formed to shake off the yoke of the king of Babylon, and violate the homage and fealty he had sworn to him. For this God by the prophet here,

**I.** Threatens the ruin of him and his kingdom, by a parable of two eagles and a vine (v. 1-10), and the explanation of that parable (v. 11-21). But, in the close,

**II.** He promises hereafter to raise the royal family of Judah again, the house of David, in the Messiah and his kingdom (v. 22-24).

## ⌘ EZEKIEL 17:1-21

### THE PARABLE OF THE EAGLES

We must take all these verses together, that we may have the parable and the explanation of it at one view before us, because they will illustrate one another.

**1.** The prophet is appointed to *put forth a riddle* to the *house of Israel* (v. 2), not to puzzle them, as Samson's riddle was put forth to the Philistines, not to hide the mind of God from them in obscurity, or to leave them in uncertainty about it, one advancing one conjecture and another another, as is usual in expounding riddles; no, he is immediately to tell them the meaning of it. *Let him that speaks in an unknown tongue pray that he may interpret,* <sup>⌘</sup>1 Corinthians 14:13. But he must deliver this message in a riddle or parable that they might take the more notice of it, might be the more affected with it themselves, and might the better remember it and tell

it to others. For these reasons God often used similitudes by his servants the prophets, and Christ himself *opened his mouth in parables*. Riddles and parables are used for an amusement to ourselves and an entertainment to our friends. The prophet must make use of these to see if in this dress the things of God might find acceptance, and insinuate themselves into the minds of a careless people. Note, Ministers should study to find out acceptable words, and try various methods to do good; and, as far as they have reason to think will be for edification, should both bring that which is familiar into their preaching and their preaching too into their familiar discourse, that there may not be so vast a dissimilitude as with some there is between what they say in the pulpit and what they say out.

**2.** He is appointed to expound this riddle to *the rebellious house*, v. 12. Though being *rebellious* they might justly have been left in ignorance, to see and hear and not perceive, yet the thing shall be explained to them: *Know you not what these things mean?* Those that knew the story, and what was now in agitation, might make a shrewd guess at the meaning of this riddle, but, that they might be left without excuse, he is to give it to them in plain terms, stripped of the metaphor. But the enigma was first propounded for them to study on awhile, and to send to their friends at Jerusalem, that they might enquire after and expect the solution of it some time after.

Let us now see what the matter of this message is.

**I.** Nebuchadnezzar had some time ago carried off Jehoiachin, the same that was called *Jeconiah*, when he was but eighteen years of age and had reigned in Jerusalem but *three months*, him and his princes and great men, and had brought them captives to Babylon, <sup><1241D></sup>2 Kings 24:12. This in the parable is represented by an eagle's cropping the top and tender branch of *a cedar*, and carrying it into *a land of traffic*, *a city of merchants* (v. 3, 4), which is explained v. 12. The *king of Babylon* took the *king of Jerusalem*, who was no more able to resist him than a young twig of a tree is to contend with the strongest bird of prey, that easily crops it off, perhaps towards the making of *her nest*. Nebuchadnezzar, in Daniel's vision, is *a lion*, the king of beasts (<sup><2004></sup>Daniel 7:4); there he has *eagle's wings*, so swift were his motions, so speedy were his conquests. Here, in this parable, he is *an eagle*, the king of birds, a *great eagle*, that lives upon spoil and rapine, whose young ones *suck up blood*, <sup><431D></sup>Job 39:30. His dominion extends itself far and wide, like the great and long wings of an eagle; the

people are numerous, for it is *full of feathers*; the court is splendid, for it has *divers colours*, which look like *embroidering*, as the word is. Jerusalem is Lebanon, a forest of houses, and very pleasant. The royal family is *the cedar*; Jehoiachin is the *top branch*, the *top of the young twigs*, which he crops off. Babylon is the *land of traffic* and *city of merchants* where it is set. And the king of Judah, being of the house of David, will think himself much degraded and disgraced to be lodged among tradesmen; but he must make the best of it.

**II.** When he carried him to Babylon he made his uncle Zedekiah king in his room, v. 5, 6. His name was *Mattaniah* — *the gift of the Lord*, which Nebuchadnezzar changed into *Zedekiah* — *the justice of the Lord*, to remind him to be just like the God he called his, for fear of his justice. This was *one of the seed of the land*, a native, not a foreigner, not one of his Babylonian princes; he was *planted in a fruitful field*, for so Jerusalem as yet was; he *placed it by great waters*, where it would be likely to grow, like a *willow-tree*, which grows quickly, and grows best in moist ground, but is never designed nor expected to be a stately tree. He *set it with care and circumspection* (so some read it); he wisely provided that it might grow, but that it might not grow too big. *He took of the king's seed* (so it is explained, v. 13) and *made a covenant with him* that he should have the kingdom, and enjoy the regal power and dignity, provided he held it as his vassal, dependent on him and accountable to him. He *took an oath of him*, made him swear allegiance to him, swear by his own God, the God of Israel, that he would be a faithful tributary to him, <sup><483></sup>2 Chronicles 36:13. He also *took away the mighty of the land*, the chief of the men of war, partly as hostages for the performance of the covenant, and partly that, the land being thereby weakened, the king might be the less able, and therefore the less in temptation, to break his league. What he designed we are told (v. 14): *That the kingdom might be base*, in respect both of honour and strength, might neither be a rival with its powerful neighbours, nor a terror to its feeble ones, as it had been, that *it might not left up itself* to vie with the kingdom of Babylon, or to bear down any of the petty states that were in subjection to it. But yet he designed that by *the keeping of this covenant it might stand*, and continue a kingdom. Hereby the pride and ambition of that haughty potentate would be gratified, who aimed to be *like the Most High* (<sup><2344></sup>Isaiah 14:14), to have all about him subject to him. Now see here,

**1.** How sad a change sin made with the royal family of Judah. Time was when all the nations about were tributaries to that; now that has not only lost its dominion over other nations, but has itself become a tributary. *How has the gold become dim!* Nations by sin sell their liberty, and princes their dignity, and *profane their crowns by casting them to the ground.*

**2.** How wisely Zedekiah did for himself in accepting these terms, though they were dishonourable, when necessity brought him to it. A man may live very comfortably and contentedly, though he cannot bear a part, and make a figure, as formerly. A kingdom may stand firmly and safely, though it do not stand so high as it has sometimes done; and so may a family.

**III.** Zedekiah, while he continued faithful to the king of Babylon, did very well, and, if he would but have reformed his kingdom, and returned to God and his duty, he would have done better, and by that means might soon have recovered his former dignity, v. 6. This plant grew, and though it was *set as a willow-tree*, and little account was made of it, yet it became *a spreading vine of low stature*, a great blessing to his own country, and his fruits *made glad their hearts*; and it is better to be a spreading vine of low stature than a lofty cedar of no use. Nebuchadnezzar was pleased, for *the branches turned towards him*, and rested on him as the vine on the wall, and he had his share of the fruits of this vine; *the roots thereof* too were *under him*, and at his disposal. The Jews had reason to be pleased, for they sat under their own vine, which *brought forth branches, and shot forth sprigs*, and looked pleasant and promising. See how gradually the judgments of God came upon this provoking people, how God gave them respite and so gave them space to repent. He made *their kingdom base*, to try if that would humble them, before he made it no kingdom; yet left it easy for them, to try if that would win upon them to return to him, that the troubles threatened might be prevented.

**IV.** Zedekiah knew not when he was well off, but grew impatient of the disgrace of being a tributary to the king of Babylon, and, to get clear of it, entered into a private league with the king of Egypt. He had no reason to complain that the king of Babylon put any new hardships upon him or improved his advantages against him, that he oppressed or impoverished his country, for, as the prophet had said before (v. 6) to aggravate his treachery, he shows again (v. 8) what a fair way he was in to be considerable: *He was planted in a good soil by great waters*; his family

was likely enough to be built up, and his exchequer to be filled, in a little time, so that, if he had dealt faithfully, he might have been *a goodly vine*. But there was *another great eagle* that he had an affection for, and put a confidence in, and that was the *king of Egypt*, v. 7. Those two great potentates, the kings of Babylon and Egypt, were but two great eagles, *birds of prey*. This great eagle of Egypt is said to have *great wings*, but not to be *long-winged* as the king of Babylon, because, though the kingdom of Egypt was strong, yet it was not of such a vast extent as that of Babylon was. The great eagle is said to have *many feathers*, much wealth and many soldiers, which he depended upon as a substantial defence, but which really were no more than so *may feathers*. Zedekiah, promising himself liberty, made himself a vassal to the king of Egypt, foolishly expecting ease by changing his master. Now *this vine* did secretly and under-hand *bend her roots towards* the king of Egypt, that great eagle, and after awhile did openly *shoot forth her branches towards him*, give him an intimation how much she coveted an alliance with him, *that he might water it by the furrows of her plantation*, whereas it was *planted by great waters*, and did not need any assistance from him. This is expounded, v. 15. Zedekiah rebelled against the king of Babylon in *sending his ambassadors into Egypt*, that they might *give him horses and much people*, to enable him to contend with the king of Babylon. See what a change sin had made with the people of God! God promised that they should be a numerous people, as the sand of the sea; yet now, if their king had occasion for *much people*, he must send to Egypt for them, they being for sin *diminished and brought low*, <sup><HAY3></sup>Psalm 107:39. See also the folly of fretful discontented spirits, that ruin themselves by striving to better themselves, whereas they might be easy and happy enough if they would but *make the best of that which is*.

**V.** God here threatens Zedekiah with the utter destruction of him and his kingdom, and, in displeasure against him, passes that doom upon him for his treacherous revolt from the king of Babylon. This is represented in the parable (v. 9, 19) by the *plucking up of this vine by the roots*, *the cutting off of the fruit*, and *the withering of the leaves*, the leaves *of her spring*, when they are in their greenness (<sup><K12></sup>Job 8:12), before they begin in autumn to wither of themselves. The project shall be blasted; it shall *utterly wither*. The affairs of this perfidious prince shall be ruined past retrieve; as a vine when the east wind blasts it, so that it shall be fit for nothing but the fire (as we had it in that parable, <sup><204></sup>Ezekiel 15:4), it shall

wither even *in the furrows where it grew*, though they were ever so well watered. It shall be destroyed *without great power or many people to pluck it up*; for what need is there of raising the militia to pluck up a vine? Note, God can bring great things to pass without much ado. He needs not great power and many people to effect his purposes; a handful will serve if he pleases. He can without any difficulty ruin a sinful king and kingdom, and make no more of it than we do of rooting up a tree that cumpers the ground. In the explanation of the parable the sentence is very largely recorded: *Shall he prosper?* v. 15. Can he expect to do ill and fare well? Nay, shall he that does such wicked things *escape*? Shall he *break the covenant, and be delivered* from that vengeance which is the just punishment of his treachery? No; can he expect to do ill and not suffer ill? Let him hear his doom.

**1.** It is ratified by the oath of God (v. 16): *As I live, saith the Lord God, he shall die* for it. This intimates how highly God resented the crime, and how sure and severe the punishment of it would be. God *swears in his wrath*, as he did <sup>1081</sup> Psalm 95:11. Note, As God's promises are confirmed with an oath, for comfort to the saints, so are his threatenings, for terror to the wicked. As sure as God lives and is happy (I may add, and as long), so sure, so long, shall impenitent sinners die and be miserable.

**2.** It is justified by the heinousness of the crime he had been guilty of.

**(1.)** He had been very ungrateful to his benefactor, who had *made him king*, and undertook to protect him, had made him a prince when he might as easily have made him a prisoner. Note, It is a sin against God to be unkind to our friends and to lift up the heel against those that have helped to raise us.

**(2.)** He had been very false to him whom he had covenanted with. This is mostly insisted on: He *despised the oath*. When his conscience or friends reminded him of it he made a jest of it, put on a daring resolution, and *broke it*, v. 15, 16, 18, 19. He broke through it, and took a pride in making nothing of it, as a great tyrant in our own day, whose maxim (they say) it is, *That princes ought not to be slaves to their word any further than it is for their interest*. That which aggravated Zedekiah's perfidiousness was that the oath by which he had bound himself to the king of Babylon was,

[1.] A solemn oath. An emphasis is laid upon this (v. 18): *When, lo, he had given his hand*, as a confederate with the king of Babylon, not only as

his subject, but as his friend, the joining of hands being a token of the joining of hearts.

[2.] As sacred oath. God says (v. 19): It is *my oath* that he has despised and *my covenant that he has broken*. In every solemn oath God is appealed to as a witness of the sincerity of him that swears, and invoked as a judge and revenger of his treachery if he now swear falsely or at any time hereafter break his oath. But the oath of allegiance to a prince is particularly called *the oath of God* (<sup>2180</sup>Ecclesiastes 8:2), as if that had something in it more sacred than another oath; for princes are *ministers of God to us for good*, <sup>6104</sup>Romans 13:4. Now Zedekiah's breaking this oath and covenant is the sin which God will *recompense upon his own head* (v. 19), the *trespass which he has trespassed against God*, for which God will *plead with him*, v. 20. Note, Perjury is a heinous sin and highly provoking to the God of heaven. It would not serve for an excuse, *First*, That he who took this oath was a king, a king of the house of David, whose liberty and dignity might surely set him above the obligation of oaths. No; though kings are gods to us, they are men to God, and not exempt from his law and judgment. The prince is doubtless as firmly bound before God to the people by his coronation-oath as the people are to the princes by the oath of allegiance. *Secondly*, Nor that this oath was sworn to the king of Babylon, a heathen prince, worse than a heretic, with whom the church of Rome says, *No faith is to be kept*. No; though Nebuchadnezzar was a worshipper of false gods, yet the true God will avenge this quarrel when one of his worshippers breaks his league with him; for truth is a debt due to all men; and, if the professors of the true religion deal perfidiously with those of a false religion, their profession will be so far from excusing, much less justifying them, that it aggravates their sin, and God will the more surely and severely punish it, because by it they give occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme; as that Mahometan prince, who, when the Christians broke their league with him, cried out, *O Jesus! are these thy Christians?* *Thirdly*, Nor would it justify him that the oath was extorted from him by a conqueror, for the covenant was made upon a valuable consideration. He held his life and crown upon this condition, that he should be faithful and bear true allegiance to the king of Babylon; and, if he enjoy the benefit of his bargain, it is very unjust if he do not observe the terms. Let him know then that, having *despised the oath*, and *broken the covenant*, he *shall not escape*. And if the contempt and violation of such an oath, such a covenant as this, would be so punished,

of how much sorer punishment shall those be thought worthy who break covenant with God (when, *lo, they had given their hand* upon it that they would be faithful), who *tread under foot the blood* of that *covenant* as an unholy thing? Between the covenants there is no comparison.

**3.** It is particularized in divers instances, wherein the punishment is made to answer the sin.

**(1.)** He had rebelled against the king of Babylon, and the king of Babylon should be his effectual conqueror. In the place where that king *dwells* whose *covenant he broke*, even *with him in the midst of Babylon he shall die*, v. 16. He thinks to get out of his hands, but he shall fall, more than before, into his hands. God himself will now take part with the king of Babylon against him: *I will spread my net upon him*, v. 20. God has a net for those who deal perfidiously and think to escape his righteous judgments, in which those shall be taken and held who would not be held by the bond of an oath and covenant. Zedekiah dreaded Babylon: “Thither I will bring him,” says God, “and *plead with him there.*” Men will justly be forced upon that calamity which they endeavour by sin to flee from.

**(2.)** He had *relied upon the king of Egypt*, and the king of Egypt should be his ineffectual helper: *Pharaoh with his mighty army shall not make for him in the war* (v. 17), shall to him no service, nor give any check to the progress of the Chaldean forces; he shall not assist him in the *siege* by *casting up mounts and building forts*, nor in battle by *cutting off many person*. Note, Every creature is that to us which God makes it to be; and he commonly weakens and withers that *arm of flesh* which we trust in and stay ourselves upon. Now was again fulfilled what was spoken on a former similar occasion (<sup>2307</sup>Isaiah 30:7), *The Egyptians shall help in vain*. They did so; for though, upon the approach of the Egyptian army, the Chaldeans withdrew from the siege of Jerusalem, upon their retreat they returned to it again and took it. It should seem, the Egyptians were not hearty, had strength enough, but no good-will, to help Zedekiah. Note, Those who deal treacherously with those who put a confidence in them will justly be dealt treacherously with by those they put a confidence in. Yet the Egyptians were not the only states Zedekiah stayed himself upon; he had bands of his own to stand by him, but those bands, though we may suppose they were veteran troops and the best soldiers his kingdom afforded, shall become *fugitives*, shall quit their posts, and make the best of their way, and shall *fall by the sword* of the enemy, and the *remains of*



them shall be scattered, v. 21. This was fulfilled when the city was broken up and all the men of war fled, <sup><517></sup>Jeremiah 52:7. This you shall now that I the Lord have spoken it. Note, Sooner or later God's word will prove itself; and those who will not believe shall find by experience the reality and weight of it.

## <sup><517></sup>EZEKIEL 17:22-24

### PROMISES OF MERCY

When the royal family of Judah was brought to desolation by the captivity of Jehoiachin and Zedekiah it might be asked, “What has now become of the covenant of royalty made with David, that *his children should sit upon his throne for evermore*? Do the *sure mercies of David* prove thus unsure?” To this it is sufficient for the silencing of the objectors to answer that the promise was conditional. If *they will keep my covenant*, then they shall continue, <sup><517></sup>Psalms 132:12. But David's posterity broke the condition, and so forfeited the promise. But the unbelief of man shall not invalidate the promise of God. He will find out another *seed of David* in which it shall be accomplished; and that is promised in these verses.

**I.** The house of David shall again be magnified, and out of its ashes another phoenix shall arise. The metaphor of a tree, which was made use of in the threatening, is here presented in the promise, v. 22, 23. This promise had its accomplishment in part when Zerubbabel, a branch of the house of David, was raised up to head the Jews in their return out of captivity, and to rebuild the city and temple and re-establish their church and state; but it was to have its full accomplishment in the kingdom of the Messiah, who was a root out of a dry ground, and to whom God, according to promise, gave *the throne of his father David*, <sup><517></sup>Luke 1:32.

**1.** God himself undertakes the reviving and restoring of the house of David. Nebuchadnezzar was the *great eagle* that had attempted the re-establishing of the house of David in a dependence upon him, v. 5. But the attempt miscarried; his plantation withered and was plucked up. “Well,” says God, “the next shall be of my planting: *I will also take of the highest branch of the high cedar and I will set it.*” Note, As men have their designs, God also has his designs; but his will prosper when theirs are blasted. Nebuchadnezzar prided himself in setting up kingdoms at his

pleasure, <sup><2759></sup>Daniel 5:19. But those kingdoms soon had an end, whereas the *God of heaven sets up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed*, <sup><2724></sup>Daniel 2:44.

**2.** The house of David is revived in a *tender one cropped from the top of his young twigs*. Zerubbabel was so; that which was hopeful in him was but the *day of small things* (<sup><3010></sup>Zechariah 4:10), yet before him *great mountains were made plain*. Our Lord Jesus was *the highest branch of the high cedar*, the furthest of all from *the root* (for soon after he appeared the *house of David* was all cut off and extinguished), but the nearest of all to heaven, for his kingdom was not of this world. He was *taken from the top of the young twigs*, for he is *the man, the branch, a tender plant, and a root out of a dry ground* (<sup><2512></sup>Isaiah 53:2), but a *branch of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he may be glorified*.

**3.** This branch is planted *in a high mountain* (v. 22), in the *mountain of the height of Israel*, v. 23. Thither he brought Zerubbabel in triumph; there he raised up his son Jesus, sent him to gather the *lost sheep of the house of Israel* that were *scattered upon the mountains*, set him *his king upon his holy hill of Zion*, sent forth the gospel from *Mount Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem*; there, in the *height of Israel*, a nation which all its neighbours had an eye upon as conspicuous and illustrious, was the Christian church first planted. The churches of Judea were the most primitive churches. The unbelieving Jews did what they could to prevent its being planted there; but who can pluck up what God will plant? 4. Thence it spreads far and wide. The Jewish state, though it began very low in Zerubbabel's time, was set as a tender branch, which might easily be plucked up, yet took root, spread strangely, and after some time became very considerable; those of other nations, *fowl of every wing*, put themselves under the protection of it. The Christian church was at first like a grain of mustard-seed, but became, like this tender branch, a great tree, its beginning small, but its latter end increasing to admiration. When the Gentiles flocked into the church then did the *fowl of every wing* (even the birds of prey, which those preyed upon, as the *wolf and the lamb* feeding together, <sup><2516></sup>Isaiah 11:6) come and  *dwell under the shadow of this goodly cedar*. See <sup><2702></sup>Daniel 4:21.

**II.** God himself will herein be glorified, v. 24. The setting up of the Messiah's kingdom in the world shall discover more clearly than ever to the children of men that *God is the King of all the earth*, <sup><3911></sup>Psalms 47:7.

Never was there a more full conviction given of this truth, that all things are governed by an infinitely wise and mighty Providence, than that which was given by the exaltation of Christ and the establishment of his kingdom among men; for by that it appeared that God has all hearts in his hand, and the sovereign disposal of all affairs. *All the trees of the field shall know,*

- 1.** That the tree which God will have to be *brought down, and dried up,* shall be so, though it be ever so high and stately, ever so green and flourishing. Neither honour nor wealth, neither external advancements nor internal endowments, will secure men from humbling withering providence.
- 2.** That the tree which God will have to be exalted, and to flourish, shall so be, shall so do, though ever so low, and ever so dry. The house of Nebuchadnezzar, that now makes so great a figure, shall be extirpated, and the house of David, that now makes so mean a figure, shall become famous again; and the Jewish nation, that is now despicable, shall be considerable. The kingdom of Satan, that has borne so long, so large, a sway, shall be broken, and the kingdom of Christ, that was looked upon with contempt. shall be established. The Jews, who, in respect of church-privileges, had been high and green, shall be thrown out, and the Gentiles, who had been low and dry trees, shall be taken in their room, <sup>250</sup> Isaiah 54:1. All the enemies of Christ shall be abased and made his footstool, and his interests shall be confirmed and advanced: *I the Lord have spoken* (it is the decree, the declared decree, that Christ must be exalted, must be the headstone of the corner), and *I have done it*, that is, I will do it in due time, but it is as sure to be done as if it were done already. With men *saying and doing are two things*, but they are not so with God. What he has spoken we may be sure that he will do, nor shall one iota or tittle of his word fall to the ground, for *he is not a man, that he should lie, or the son of man, that he should repent* either of his threatenings or of his promises.