

# OpenTheo

## June 12th: Ezekiel 17 & Acts 13:44—14:7

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The eagles and the vine. Paul and Barnabas at Pisidian Antioch and Iconium.

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## Transcript

Ezekiel chapter 17 1 And there was another great eagle with great wings and much plumage. 2 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 walk. 3 And he set it like a willow twig, and it sprouted, and became a low spreading vine.

4 And its branches turned toward him, and its roots remained where it stood. 5 So it became a vine, and produced branches, and put out boughs. 6 And there was another great eagle with great wings and much plumage.

7 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 walk. 8 And he set it like a willow twig, and it sprouted, and became a low spreading vine. 9 And its branches turned toward him, and its roots remained where it stood.

10 And it became a vine, and produced branches, and put out boughs. 11 And there was another great eagle with great wings and much plumage. 12 And it had been planted on good soil by abundant waters, that it might produce branches and bear fruit, and become a noble vine.

13 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? 14 It will not take a strong arm or many people to pull it from its roots. 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? 15 Then the word of the Lord came to me, Say now to the rebellious house, Do you not know what these things mean? 16 Tell them, Behold, the king of Babylon came to Jerusalem, and took her king and her princes, and brought them to him to Babylon.

17 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, that the kingdom might be humble, and not lift itself up, and keep his covenant that it might stand. 18 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? 19 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.

20 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. 21 He despised the oath in breaking the covenant, and behold he gave his hand and did all these things. He shall not escape.

22 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. 23 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. 24 And all the pick 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. 25 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.

26 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.

27 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. Ezekiel chapter 17 contains a prophetic parable and its interpretation. In some ways it is similar in form to the sign act of chapter 12, as Ezekiel was instructed to prepare an exile's baggage, dig through the wall of his house, and then leave as an exile in the evening.

Much as Ezekiel's works of prophetic theatre, this parable is ambiguous, a riddle in search of an appropriate interpretation. As in the case of those acts of prophetic theatre, it is followed by some sort of interpretation, and we need to read these two things alongside each other. The parable or riddle, and the interpretation that follows, are like a lock and a key that fits it.

A prophetic parable or prophetic sign act provides a different way of viewing a series of events, offering the hearer or the witnesses different perspectives that can be illuminating precisely because of the symbols that they draw upon. The parable of this chapter is followed by some questions to the audience in verses 9-10. The parable offers a fantastical image.

Two eagles, one of the eagles later becoming a sort of gardener, and two plants. There is a shift from a cedar to a vine. The story has a series of stages that we can identify, three in particular.

The great colourful eagle comes to Lebanon and takes the top of the cedar and carries it to the land of trade and the city of merchants. In the second stage, the eagle takes the seed of the land and plants it in a fertile location near abundant waters. It thrives and becomes a low-spreading vine, directing its boughs towards the eagle or the gardener.

In the final stage, a second great eagle appears, although this eagle is less than the first eagle. As Daniel Block observes, this eagle is also distinguished from the first by his passivity. He does nothing.

The vine, however, starts to direct both its roots and its branches toward the second eagle and away from the first that had planted it in the fertile soil. The vine's hope is that the second eagle would water it. The Lord then asks the hearers of the parable a series of questions.

What do they expect to happen next in the story? What will happen to the vine? Will it thrive? Will the eagle not uproot it and cut off its fruit? Will the vine not wither when struck by the east wind? The vine, the Lord notes, could easily be uprooted. It isn't firmly grounded. It's directed its roots upward toward the second eagle and overstretched its boughs.

It is no longer a low-spreading vine. One of the reasons why parables can be so effective is by reframing reality in terms of a different story. When the person telling the parable challenges his hearers to make judgments on the basis of it, they can often arrive at different assessments than they would if they were being told a straightforward literal account of what was going on.

By making the familiar strange, the parable offers people a different way of seeing things and the possibility of breaking out of set judgments. Verses 11 to 21 present the divine interpretation of the parable. It's the key that corresponds to the log.

It's important to recognize that the interpretation belongs with the parable. Taken by itself, as Marsha Greenberg notes, several different interpretations would be possible. If we were reading the parable by itself, a number of its symbols could be read in different directions.

Indeed, this ambiguity and this symbolic polyvalence is one of the reasons why the parable can be effective. Is the cedar Israel? How about the vine? We might think, for instance, of the similarities between this passage and Psalm 80 verses 8 to 11. This might suggest, for instance, that the first eagle is the Lord.

How about the second eagle? Is the second eagle some false god? Is the well-watered land Israel, as John Taylor argues? Or is it Babylon, as Peter Lighthouse and, it seems, Daniel Bloch also suggest? The parable taken by itself, then, is ambiguous and could easily be misinterpreted or interpreted in several different ways. Bloch observes a close and highly developed series of parallels between the parable and its interpretation, with the elements of the one mapping quite clearly onto the other, all the way down to the rhetorical questions. Bloch argues that the well-watered land refers to the care that Nebuchadnezzar showed to Jehoiachin in Babylon.

This, to my mind at least, however, goes against the parallelism that he notes. We've already had an image of a vine a few chapters earlier, with the wood of the dead vine in chapter 15. We should probably read these symbols alongside each other.

Nebuchadnezzar chopped off the top of the cedar in 597 BC, when he attacked Jerusalem, removing Jehoiachin and bringing him to Babylon. Matanah, whom Nebuchadnezzar renamed Zedekiah, was placed on the throne in Jehoiachin's place. He put Zedekiah under oath, but Zedekiah looked away from Babylon to Egypt, hoping to find aid from that quarter, as we see in Jeremiah chapter 27.

Zedekiah gathered kings from the region to plot rebellion against Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon, and was condemned by the Lord for it. The Egyptians ended up failing Zedekiah, even though signs looked promising for a brief period of time. The hope in Egypt proved vain.

No effective deliverance or assistance from that quarter materialized. Zedekiah's breaking of the covenant with Babylon is described in 2 Chronicles 36 verses 11-13. Zedekiah was 21 years old when he began to reign, and he reigned 11 years in Jerusalem.

He did what was evil in the sight of the Lord his God. He did not humble himself before Jeremiah the prophet, who spoke from the mouth of the Lord. He also rebelled against King Nebuchadnezzar, who had made him swear by God.

He stiffened his neck and hardened his heart against turning to the Lord, the God of Israel. The covenant with Babylon, being enforced by an oath to God himself, was seen by the Lord as a matter of loyalty to him. To break that covenant was to despise the oath of the Lord, and the covenant with the Lord.

The consequences for Zedekiah and his people would be severe, not just from Nebuchadnezzar, his suzerain, but primarily from the Lord, the God of the covenant that he had despised by his action. The Lord would hunt Zedekiah down. He would be the one that would trap Zedekiah and send him off to Babylon.

In verses 19-21 we see that the Lord's hand is behind everything. In verses 22-24 there's a surprising shift in the way that the story is told. We once again return to the opening image of the parable, but there's a switch in the identity of the eagle.

It was Babylon in the first instance, but later, in this case, it refers to God himself. The cedar reappears. The cedar could be seen as the glorious house of David, particularly typified in the temple, and the cedars that are used to construct it and the palaces of the king.

The cedar is an image of the Davidic rule at its height. The Lord himself would take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar, and while the cedar itself might be felled, he would establish a new cedar from a tender twig taken from it. Arboricultural images of the kingdom and its rulers are very common within the prophets, these images of trees and their planting.

We might think of the image of David and the branch, or the shoot from the root of Jesse, or the stump of the felled kingdom in Isaiah chapter 6. Great rulers like Nebuchadnezzar himself in the second dream interpreted by Daniel in Daniel chapter 4 can be described as great trees that grow up and give shade to many creatures. This young and tender twig from the sprig from the top of the cedar would be preserved. It would be brought back to the place of its original planting, and after that great tree of the cedar had been felled, a new one would be planted, and this one would flourish on a high and lofty mountain.

Here we see the image of the cosmic mountain and the image of the cosmic tree coming

together. This great tree on the top of this high mountain in some sense provide an image of the union of heaven and earth, and provide a gathering place for all the creatures. The preservation and replanting of this tree from this tender shoot would be a proof to all of the trees of the field, all of these great nations and rulers, that the Lord is God, the one who is sovereign over history and all of its events.

He is the one who brings high those who are low and brings low those who are raised up. He is the one who demonstrates his identity by keeping his word and enacting his will in history. Fittingly, the parable and its interpretation ends with another recognition formula.

All the trees of the field shall know that I am the Lord. Even when the vine from the second and third acts of the parable is destroyed, the cedar whose top was removed at the beginning would be restored. The hope of the house of Israel will be fulfilled, not finally in Zedekiah and his kingdom, but in the Lord's bringing life from the death of exile.

A question to consider, where in the New Testament do we see imagery from this parable, or similar to this parable, employed? Acts chapter 13 verse 44 to chapter 14 verse 7 The next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy, and began to contradict what was spoken by Paul, reviling him. And Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, It was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you.

Since you thrust it aside and judge yourself unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles. For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth. And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.

And the word of the Lord was spreading throughout the whole region. But the Jews incited the devout women of high standing and the leading men of the city, stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their district. But they shook off the dust from their feet against them, and went to Iconium.

And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit. Now at Iconium they entered together into the Jewish synagogue, and spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed. But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles, and poisoned their minds against the brothers.

So they remained for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord, who bore witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands. But the people of the city were divided, some sided with the Jews, and some with the apostles. When an attempt was made by both Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to mistreat them and to

stone them, they learned of it, and fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding country.

And there they continued to preach the gospel. At the end of Acts chapter 13 we see that the message of Paul and Barnabas has an impact on all levels of society in Antioch and Pisidia. The whole city, Jews and Gentiles, gathers together to hear them the next Sabbath.

Despite the fact that they are gathering to hear the word of the Lord, the reaction of the Jews is not joy at the receptivity of their Gentile neighbours, but jealousy. They dislike the fact that Paul is receiving such a response, and they try to slander Paul and to close people's ears to his message. Their concern is ultimately a selfish one, driven by their personal desire for influence and power, unwilling to allow this newcomer to receive such attention.

Likely an important part of this jealousy comes from their conviction that the covenant gives them an exclusive status, preaching to Gentiles that they can become recipients of the promise of Abraham in the way that Paul and Barnabas are doing undermines their privileged status and lowers their standing relative to proselytes and God-fearers. Paul and Barnabas' message implies that Gentiles can enjoy equal standing in the people of God. Note the way that Jesus had also received an extremely hostile reaction when he had spoken about God's grace to the Gentiles and the failure of the people of Israel to receive it in Luke chapter 4 in his first sermon in Nazareth.

Paul had earlier concluded his sermon by quoting the prophetic warning. Look, you scoffers, be astounded and perish, for I am doing a work in your days, a work that you will not believe, even if one tells it to you. This word of warning very directly applies to the Jewish opponents in this situation.

As the Jews reject the message of Paul and Barnabas, they declare that they will bring the word to the Gentiles. The Jews have cast judgment upon themselves by their failure to accept the message. They have judged themselves to be unworthy.

Paul and Barnabas will now turn their attention to the Gentiles. This is not yet a complete turn to the Gentiles, just a more local one. When they move on to Iconium, Paul will again begin in a Jewish synagogue.

One of the Davidic promises associated with the Messianic servant is found in Isaiah chapter 49 verse 6, which Paul cites here. Paul and Barnabas are fulfilling Israel's calling to be a light for the blind nations. This statement, though connected first and foremost with the servant of Isaiah, Paul and Barnabas take as an instruction for their own ministry.

Presumably as the body of Christ, they extend and continue Christ's ministry by his

spirit. Even when the gospel message of Paul faces harsh rejection, God remains in control. Verse 48 speaks of as many as were appointed to eternal life believing.

God makes the word of the gospel effective in the hearts of hearers. The word of God is described as if it had a life and vitality of its own. God's word acts and brings about new situations.

And here it is spreading throughout the whole region. However, the Jewish leadership in the city is determined to stamp out Paul and Barnabas's influence. They achieve this by inciting the devout God-fearing women and the leading men of the city against Paul and Barnabas so that they will be driven out.

It's most likely, as Ben Witherington notes, that the high status women among the God-fearers were the means by which the Jews influenced the leading men of the city. It's important to appreciate some of the considerations that might have driven the Jews here. If Paul and Barnabas were to be successful, especially in gaining a large number of God-fearers, they stood to lose a great deal of their own social influence and status within the city, which would have depended in large measure upon groups such as the well-connected women, who would have been very effective at influencing the most powerful people in the city on their behalf, as they seem to have been here.

Considering that women were typically much less educated than men in ancient society, yet could nonetheless enjoy considerable influence within their households, Jews and various other sects might have especially targeted women, as they were more open to conversion, less able to be critical of their teaching, and much more apt to spread it and to increase the social influence of the religious teachers who taught it. In 2 Timothy, Paul warns Timothy about false teachers who would target weak women in such a fashion. Richard Hooker makes similar observations about the behaviour of certain sectarian Christian teachers in his own day.

The following passage is from a modernised version of his *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*. He speaks here about the way that some radical Christian teachers particularly aimed at women. ...because of their natural inclination to pity, which makes them readier than men to be generous to their preachers when they suffer want.

They are more apt because they have many opportunities to bring encouragement to the brethren. Finally, they are more apt because they especially enjoy sharing news with one another about where all of their friends and neighbours stand when it comes to the cause. False teachers and religious leaders will often prey upon the virtues of the more vulnerable, whether the trusting innocence of children, the generosity of poor widows, the whole-hearted passion of youths, the receptivity of new converts, the greater empathy of women, or the religious devotion of the devout yet unlearned.

One of the tasks of faithful pastors is to guard the goodness of these traits, protecting



such persons from those who would prey upon them. Also, over time, to equip such persons with the means by which to protect themselves without hardening them. Jesus had instructed his disciples when he sent them out in Matthew 10, verses 11-23, And whatever town or village you enter, find out who is worthy in it, and stay there until you depart.

As you enter the house, greet it, and if the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it. But if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. And if anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or town.

Truly I say to you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town. Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles.

When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak, or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. For it is not you who speak, but the spirit of your father speaking through you. Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, and you will be hated by all for my name's sake, but the one who endures to the end will be saved.

When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next, for truly I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes. Paul and Barnabas are then following this pattern as they leave Pisidian Antioch, putting the dust off their feet and moving on to Iconium. However, they leave behind them a community of faithful new disciples who are filled with joy and the Holy Spirit.

The mission now moves east, continuing in the inland regions of Asia Minor, modern day central Turkey, in Iconium, then later moving southeast on to Lystra and Derbe. Once again in Iconium they have an initially very positive response to their message, with many Jewish and Greek converts. Once again, however, unbelieving Jews oppose them and stir up the Gentiles against them.

This new doctrine that Paul and Barnabas are bringing threatens to overturn the status quo and undermine the standing of the Jews in society. Nevertheless, Paul and Barnabas remain a long time, courageously speaking concerning the Lord, and their message is confirmed by signs and wonders by which the Lord bore witness to his word. The people are divided by their message, into people for and against the missionaries.

Gentiles and Jews join together with their rulers in an attempt to stone them. We see here a sort of false Jew-Gentile community emerging as the opposing shadow of the true

Jew-Gentile community that has been formed through the message of the Gospel in the church. Hearing of the plot, they flee to Lystra and Derbe, where they continue to proclaim the Gospel.

A question to consider. Comparing verses 46 and 48 of chapter 13, what are some of the lessons that we might learn about divine sovereignty and human responsibility?