

**Ezekiel 17**

In 605<sup>bc</sup> Nebuchadnezzar, commander of the Babylonian army, defeated an Assyrian/Egyptian alliance at Carchemish by the Euphrates river making Babylon the new world leader and opened the door for them to continue their campaign south. In that same year Nebuchadnezzar went as far as Jerusalem and took prominent people, including the prophet Daniel, back to Babylon as potential governmental leaders. However, Nebuchadnezzar's work was cut short when his father (the king of Babylon) suddenly died, and he was forced to return to Babylon to claim the throne. In 601<sup>bc</sup> he once again started moving south and at Ashkelon was again challenged by Egypt where both armies took heavy losses; neither could claim victory but the battle temporarily repelled Nebuchadnezzar. He then regrouped, and in 597<sup>bc</sup> returned to Jerusalem and took the 18 year old king of Judah, Jehoiachin, back to Babylon along with Ezekiel and others; he then appointed Zedekiah as ruler over Judah. [Please note that scholars disagree on the exact dates of these events, but they all fall within a few years of each other]

Chapter 17 is about the international affairs of Judah, Babylon, and Egypt between the years 597 and 587<sup>bc</sup> during Zedekiah's reign. These events can be found in 2 Kings 24:8-20, 2 Chronicles 36:9-13 and Jeremiah 37; 52:1-7. The chapter also has some points of relationship to Isaiah 11; 53, Daniel 2:34-35, 44-45 and Micah 4.

***17:1 Now the word of the LORD came to me saying,***

***17:2 "Son of man, propound a riddle and speak a parable to the house of Israel,***

***17:3 saying, 'Thus says the Lord GOD, "A great eagle with great wings, long pinions and a full plumage of many colors came to Lebanon and took away the top of the cedar.***

***17:4 "He plucked off the topmost of its young twigs and brought it to a land of merchants; he set it in a city of traders.***

Ezekiel speaks to the people in a riddle. Riddles were often used as a means of forcing people to consider a message conceptually that they normally didn't want to hear. Ezekiel begins by describing a great eagle that has large wings, long pinions (symbols of vast dominion and great power), and brilliantly colored plumage. The bird goes to Lebanon, plucks a fresh crown off of a cedar and carries it to "a land of merchants."

***17: 5 "He also took some of the seed of the land and planted it in fertile soil. He placed it beside abundant waters; he set it like a willow.***

***17: 6 "Then it sprouted and became a low, spreading vine with its branches turned toward him, but its roots remained under it. So it became a vine and yielded shoots and sent out branches.***

In verses 5 and 6 the image of the eagle changes to that of a gardener. The gardener takes a seed from the same area and plants it in a well-watered piece of fertile ground. The seed's response is exactly what the gardener intends; it takes root, and sends its tendrils out along the ground directing its branches toward the eagle. It is a lowly plant, not like the great cedars, but it flourishes under the gardener's care. All seems well. The gardener has done everything he could to ensure the well-being of the plant and the plant is vigorous in its growth.

***17: 7 "But there was another great eagle with great wings and much plumage; and behold, this vine bent its roots toward him and sent out its branches toward him from the beds where it was planted, that he might water it.***

***17: 8 "It was planted in good soil beside abundant waters, that it might yield branches and bear fruit and become a splendid vine."***

Suddenly, a second eagle appears. It is similar to the first eagle in that it also has great wings and much plumage, though it is not described as gloriously as the first. The eagle does nothing for the vine, but the vine

is attracted to it and stretches its tendrils toward it so that the eagle might water it. In doing so, the vine rejects the benevolence and care of the first eagle who had planted it “in good soil beside abundant waters, that it might yield branches and bear fruit and become a splendid vine.”

**17: 9 "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 sprouting leaves wither? And neither by great strength nor by many people can it be raised from its roots again.**

**17: 10 "Behold, though it is planted, will it thrive? Will it not completely wither as soon as the east wind strikes it-- wither on the beds where it grew?""**

Verses 9 and 10 ask, “What will happen to the vine?” Will it thrive or be uprooted? Surely the one who planted the vine will pull it out by the roots and let it wither.

The interpretation of verses 1-10 follows in verses 11- 21:

**17: 11 Moreover, the word of the LORD came to me, saying,**

**17: 12 "Say now to the rebellious house, 'Do you not know what these things mean?' Say, 'Behold, the king of Babylon came to Jerusalem, took its king and princes and brought them to him in Babylon.**

The first eagle represents Babylon who had dominion over many peoples. Since the cedars of Lebanon were used to make the temple and the palace (1 Ki. 7:2; Jer. 22:23), Lebanon becomes a fitting symbol of Jerusalem. Transporting the top of the cedar from Lebanon pictures Nebuchadnezzar transporting king Jehoiachin to Babylon (2 Ki. 24:8-16), the city of merchants, along with the Judean nobility in 586bc.

**17: 13 'He took one of the royal family and made a covenant with him, putting him under oath. He also took away the mighty of the land,**

**17:14 that the kingdom might be in subjection, not exalting itself, but keeping his covenant that it might continue.**

The eagle also took a seed and planted it. The seed is now identified as “one in the royal family.” The planting of the seed speaks of Nebuchadnezzar’s installment of Zedekiah (Jehoiachin’s uncle) as king of Judah (2 Ki. 24:17-18). This was an act of leniency, for Nebuchadnezzar could have had a foreigner rule Jerusalem for him.

Verse 13 states that Zedekiah had made a covenant with Nebuchadnezzar who had graciously allowed him to flourish in the land like a luxurious vine. But Zedekiah was also now dependent upon Babylon for survival since Nebuchadnezzar had reduced Judah’s army so it wouldn’t be a threat to him (i.e. he “took away the mighty in the land”). The NIV translation of 7:13b and 14 makes this clearer. It says that Nebuchadnezzar “also carried away the leading men of the land, so that the kingdom would be brought low, unable to rise again, surviving only by keeping his treaty.”

Ezekiel interprets this in an entirely favorable light. Had Zedekiah remained faithful to their agreement, Judah could have continued to prosper as a vassal state.

**17: 15 'But he rebelled against him by sending his envoys to Egypt that they might give him horses and many troops. Will he succeed? Will he who does such things escape? Can he indeed break the covenant and escape?**

**17: 16 'As I live,' declares the Lord GOD, 'Surely in the country of the king who put him on the throne, whose oath he despised and whose covenant he broke, in Babylon he shall die.**

In verses 15 and 16 the second eagle is identified and the vine's attraction to it is described.

The relationship between Nebuchadnezzar and Zedekiah did not continue as it should have. Zedekiah rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar (17:15) and began to foolishly seek an alliance with Egypt. Egypt was probably responsive to the idea since it was looking for a buffer state to insulate it from Babylon, its rival empire.

Would he succeed? Can Zedekiah break the covenant with Babylon and escape (17:15)? The answer is no! God declares that he shall die in Babylon. But the reason God gives for Zedekiah's fate is that he had broken his covenant (see notes on 17:18-21).

Ezekiel assumes that Zedekiah should have been satisfied with subordination to Nebuchadnezzar for he was a benevolent King. "The seed of the land had good soil, many waters and every opportunity to sprout branches, bear fruit and be a luxuriant vine. There was no valid reason for Zedekiah's revolt; he was neither oppressed nor deprived. Perfidy, ambition, and ingratitude lead to insubordination. But his treacherous scheme would not prosper, as the rest of the chapter predicts" (Feinberg, 95).

In verses 17-21 Ezekiel changes his focus from the earthly events to the spiritual implications.

**17: 17 'Pharaoh with his mighty army and great company will not help him in the war, when they cast up ramps and build siege walls to cut off many lives.**

In spite of Zedekiah's attempt to free himself from Babylon by making an alliance with Egypt, when Babylon comes to destroy Jerusalem, Egypt will not come to Jerusalem's aid.

**17: 18 'Now he despised the oath by breaking the covenant, and behold, he pledged his allegiance, yet did all these things; he shall not escape.'**

**17: 19 Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD, "As I live, surely My oath which he despised and My covenant which he broke, I will inflict on his head.**

**17: 20 "I will spread My net over him, and he will be caught in My snare. Then I will bring him to Babylon and enter into judgment with him there regarding the unfaithful act which he has committed against Me.**

**17: 21 "All the choice men in all his troops will fall by the sword, and the survivors will be scattered to every wind; and you will know that I, the LORD, have spoken."**

We learn from verse 19 that Zedekiah had done more than break a covenant with Nebuchadnezzar; he had also broken a covenant with Yahweh ("My oath he despised") for Nebuchadnezzar made Zedekiah take his oath in the name of God (2 Chron. 36:13).

Thus, the fundamental reason as to why Zedekiah would not succeed was not because the armies of Babylon were stronger than the armies of Egypt; rather, it was because an oath had been made in the name of Yahweh and Zedekiah had broken it. Therefore, Yahweh will capture him like prey, deport him to Babylon, and punish him appropriately (v. 20).

Through these events (the exile of Jehoiachin) the Davidic dynasty ends; but one would come who would rule on the throne of David. The story reaches a crescendo with the promise of a new and glorious future for the Davidic dynasty (17:22-24).

**17: 22 Thus says the Lord GOD, "I will also take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar and set it out; I will pluck from the topmost of its young twigs a tender one and I will plant it on a high and lofty mountain.**

**17: 23 "On the high mountain of Israel I will plant it, that it may bring forth boughs and bear fruit and become a stately cedar. And birds of every kind will nest under it; they will nest in the shade of its branches.**

**17: 24 "All the trees of the field will know that I am the LORD; I bring down the high tree, exalt the low tree, dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will perform it."**

After God has used humanity to accomplish His purposes, Yahweh intervenes directly and takes the lofty top of the cedar, brings it to Israel, and plants it Himself. The sprig is called a "tender one," no doubt identifying it as the messianic descendent who would come from the Davidic line (see Isa. 11:1-5; Jer. 23:5; 33:15; Zech. 3:8; 6:12). The mountain upon which God plants it is Mount Zion. There the sprig "grows majestically upward, and expands over the earth offering shelter to every species of bird (Matt. 13:31-32).

God will raise and lower nations (17:24), and "In the mountain of Israel, God will establish his chosen one; He will prosper and all the nations (i.e. the trees of the field, v. 24) under His worldwide rule will be blessed" (Feinberg, 98; Dan. 7:13-14); they will know that God is the LORD.

Though Israel had failed miserably, God would not fail; the Davidic dynasty would rise again, but this time the King would be perfectly righteous and rule over a kingdom that has no end.

Block uncovers some theological applications from chapter 17 (NICOT, Ezekiel, vol. 1, 553-554):

1) (paraphrased from Block) When people respond to crises they should consider the cause behind the crises, not merely the symptoms. The Judean crisis had been triggered by the deliberate breach of faith of the people against Yahweh. "Their attempt to procure aid from Egypt while ignoring their moral and spiritual decline represented the ultimate folly that only hastened Yahweh's judgment. Like Zedekiah's plan, human goals of liberation may be noble, but this does not sanctify the enterprise if the strategy evades the real issue."

2) Second, those who claim to be the people of God must take him seriously in all aspects of life. Covenants and oaths are binding at any time. When one invokes the name of Yahweh as a witness and guarantor of the promise, one may not expect him to wink when it is violated.

3) Third, Yahweh remains sovereign over history. When his people experience calamity, his hand is in it. When foreign nations sweep down on them, they come as his agents. No nation has ever become so powerful that he cannot bring it down in a moment; and no people is so low that he cannot exalt it. By his providence he governs human affairs so that the schemes of the wicked are frustrated and his own objectives are ultimately achieved.

4) Fourth, humans may violate the commitments they have made, but Yahweh remains true to his word. Nebuchadnezzar's conquest of Jerusalem and his removal of Zedekiah from the throne had cast doubts on the veracity of Yahweh's covenant with David. Although the benefits of covenant relationship are always contingent, Yahweh would not renege on his promise. He would raise up a scion from his plant, who would mount the throne of Israel and restore shalom not only to his people but also to the world. He has spoken; he will perform.

**Ezekiel 18**

One of the great principles found in Ezekiel 18 is that people are held personally accountable for their sins against God:

**18:1** *Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying,*

**18:2** *"What do you mean by using this proverb concerning the land of Israel, saying, 'The fathers eat the sour grapes, But the children's teeth are set on edge'?"*

A proverb had been circulating around both the exiles and those in Jerusalem (cf. Jer. 31:29) that needed to be addressed. The proverb was, "the fathers eat the sour grapes, But the children's teeth are set on edge" (v.2).

The word for "sour grapes" denotes the unripe fruit of the grapevine. The words "to set on edge" describe the effect of the unripe grapes on the teeth; namely, the puckery feeling that makes your teeth feel strange when the unripe fruit is eaten (Block, 558; perhaps in Japanese = 渋い?).

The proverb meant that the children were feeling the effects of their fathers' behavior; their fathers ate the sour grapes, but the children's mouths were all puckered up. In other words, the people were excusing their own sins by attributing their problems to the sins of their fathers. In essence they were saying, "This is the way things are and there is nothing we can do about it." Carson says, ". . . instead of pursuing justice and covenant renewal, they were using the proverb as an excuse for moral indifference and tired fatalism" (Carson in the September 30 meditation of For the Love of God).

"Scholars have generally understood the proverb as a sarcastic and cynical mockery of the system of divine righteousness that would punish children for the guilt of their parents" (Block, 559).

Block disagrees with this interpretation (as do I), but he explains the traditional understanding of the passage as follows:

This traditional doctrine of deferred responsibility supposedly created serious problems for the exiles. Perceiving themselves to be innocent, they accuse Yahweh of unfairness in his administration of justice. He is not concerned about the guilt or innocence of an individual; all that matters is balancing sin and retribution. In so doing they have turned the significance of the doctrine on its head. The Decalogue statement had originally been intended as a proleptic warning to adults to guard their contact because of the implications of their actions for their children. But in the mouths of Ezekiel's contemporaries, it has been transformed into a retrospective accusation of divine injustice. It is not fair that the "children," the exiles, should be punished for the sins of the "fathers," their ancestors. By this assessment, the proverb expresses in figurative form the doctrine explicitly declared in Lamentations 5:7: Our fathers have sinned and are no more, and we are the ones who have borne their guilt. (Block, 559,560).

Block challenges this interpretation for a number of reasons (Block, NICOT, Ezekiel, vol. 1, 560-561):

1) (paraphrased from Block) The expression used by Ezekiel, "fathers eat sour grapes, and children's teeth are blunted," emphasizes the habitual and durative nature of the action. Accordingly, the saying expresses belief in an evitable and uncontrollable determinism. This is how things are; one can do nothing to change it.

2) Second, earlier, in chapter 16, Ezekiel had recognized the cause-effect relationship between generations. In quoting the proverb "Like mother, like daughter," however, his concern was not to blame previous generations for the guilt of the present, but to establish that personality traits are passed on from one generation to another. In her conduct Jerusalem proves she is a true daughter of her Amorite father and Hitite mother.

3) Third, if the proverb intends to mock or challenge the divine system of justice, why is the point made so obliquely? Verse 25 demonstrates that Ezekiel's audience is not above making direct charges against Yahweh. Furthermore, Lamentations 5:7 preserves a form in which such accusations were leveled. In the minds of those who use the proverb, the issue is not sin and retribution, but the conclusion, based on decades and centuries of observation and experience, that present circumstances are inextricably linked to the actions of past generations.

4) Fourth, verse 19 contradicts a theological interpretation of verse 2. According to the traditional interpretation, the proverb would have the people accusing God of injustice because he had visited the sins of the fathers on the children. However, in verse 19 they ask why he should not do so. The first represents a rejection of traditional theology; the second a demand for its implementation. It is inconceivable that the prophet's intervening arguments would have had such a dramatic effect on them.

The problem that the proverb poses for Ezekiel is not with punishment that children are bearing for the sins of the fathers, or even the issue of theodicy. [defending the attributes of God against objections resulting from physical and moral evil]. On the contrary, it reflects a materialistic fatalism, a resignation to immutable cosmic rules of cause and effect, an embittered paralysis of the soul, that has left the exiles without hope and without God. To the extent that the charge concerns God at all, it accuses him of disinterest or impotence in the face of the exiles' current crisis. All these years they have put their trust in their divine patron, only to discover that they are victims of an immutable law of the universe; the fate of one generation is inexorably determined by the actions of the previous. Their theology and their God have betrayed them.

Most of the rest of the chapter provides a counterthesis to this fatalistic perspective.

**18:3 "As I live," declares the Lord GOD, "you are surely not going to use this proverb in Israel anymore.**

**18:4 "Behold, all souls are Mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is Mine. The soul who sins will die.**

Ezekiel moves from the fatalism of the people to God's rules for governing the universe. His view of reality rests on two pillars: (1) God has a claim on every person's life (all souls are Mine) and (2) there is a real connection between guilt and punishment, sin and justice (the soul who sins will die).

God is the Creator and Sustainer of all life. The people are not victims of immutable cosmic laws; their life is in the hands of God. Deuteronomy 24:16 says, "Fathers shall not be put to death for their sons, nor shall sons be put to death for their fathers; everyone shall be put to death for his own sin."

*It needs to be made clear that Ezekiel is speaking of physical life and death, not spiritual* (Feinberg, 99; Block; Alexander, 824). Physical death was the judgment imposed when God judged the nation through Babylon.

Ezekiel was emphasizing the responsibility of one's personal sin in relationship to the judgment. He made no attempt to explain the suffering of the innocent.

Ezekiel seems to contradict Moses in Exodus 20:5: "I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me."

Carson in the September 30 meditation of *For the Love of God* comments:

. . . the proverb does in fact convey some truth. In various ways, corporate responsibility does cross generational lines. At the giving of the Law, God himself declares that he punishes the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate him—though of course this presupposes that these later generations continue to hate him. The preaching of Isaiah, of Jeremiah, and of Ezekiel himself threatens suffering and exile because of the persistent rebellion and idolatry of both preceding generations and the current crop of Israelites. We ourselves know that sin is often social in its effects: for instance, children from backgrounds of abuse often become abusers, children from arrogant homes often become arrogant themselves, or turn out to be broken and bitter. Sin is rarely entirely private and individualistic. The proverb is not entirely wrong.

When Jeremiah counters this proverb, the alternative he presents is eschatological—that is, the proverb will be overthrown in the last days, with the dawning of the new covenant [Jer. 31:29-31]. Ezekiel's point is a little different. God is concerned with every individual: "For every living soul belongs to me, the father as well as the son" (Ezek. 18:3). Moreover, whatever social consequences there are to sin, one must never use the proverb as an excuse to cover current sin. Individual responsibility always prevails: "The soul who sins is the one who will die" (Ezek. 18:4). That is the importance of the accounts of behavioral change in this chapter. They are not establishing some simple scheme of works righteousness. Rather, they insist that genuine religion is transforming, and no excuses (hidden perhaps behind a proverb) will suffice. The practical conclusion is found in Ezekiel 18:30-32, which deserves to be memorized.

No generation is the moral extension of another; people die for their own sins and no one else's (Block, 563). To illustrate this, Ezekiel gives three case studies of divine justice:

- 1) The Case of the Righteous Person (18:5-9)
- 2) The Case of the Wicked Son (18:10-13)
- 3) The Case of the Righteous Grandson (18:14-18)

**18:5 "But if a man is righteous and practices justice and righteousness,  
18:6 and does not eat at the mountain shrines or lift up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, or defile his neighbor's wife or approach a woman during her menstrual period--  
18:7 if a man does not oppress anyone, but restores to the debtor his pledge, does not commit robbery, but gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with clothing,  
18:8 if he does not lend money on interest or take increase, if he keeps his hand from iniquity and executes true justice between man and man,  
18:9 if he walks in My statutes and My ordinances so as to deal faithfully-- he is righteous and will surely live," declares the Lord GOD.**

Verses 5-9 establish the link between righteous action and life. Righteousness is behavior that conforms to a norm. The norm of Israel was the OT law. Verse 6 speaks of righteousness in relation to false worship and sexual sins. Verses 7 and 8 cover righteousness in the community. Verse 9 concludes, that as one keeps the law of God, he or she will live; that is, they shall escape the divine judgment that is about to hit Jerusalem.

**18:10 "Then he may have a violent son who sheds blood and who does any of these things to a brother**

**18:11 (though he himself did not do any of these things), that is, he even eats at the mountain shrines, and defiles his neighbor's wife,**

**18:12 oppresses the poor and needy, commits robbery, does not restore a pledge, but lifts up his eyes to the idols and commits abomination,**

**18:13 he lends money on interest and takes increase; will he live? He will not live! He has committed all these abominations, he will surely be put to death; his blood will be on his own head.**

In verses 10-13 Ezekiel continues to consider the relationship of one's life to one's destiny. The righteous man of verses 5-9 had a violent son. He sheds blood and has no regard for human life. This forms a contrast to the righteous man who does everything to preserve human life – he feeds the poor, clothes the needy, and executes justice between men, etc.

Shall this man live? The answer, of course, is that he shall not; "his blood will be on his own head," that is, he is held accountable for his actions.

**18:14 "Now behold, he has a son who has observed all his father's sins which he committed, and observing does not do likewise.**

**18:15 "He does not eat at the mountain shrines or lift up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, or defile his neighbor's wife,**

**18:16 or oppress anyone, or retain a pledge, or commit robbery, but he gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with clothing,**

**18:17 he keeps his hand from the poor, does not take interest or increase, but executes My ordinances, and walks in My statutes; he will not die for his father's iniquity, he will surely live.**

**18:18 "As for his father, because he practiced extortion, robbed his brother and did what was not good among his people, behold, he will die for his iniquity.**

Verses 14-18 introduce the son of the wicked man, the third generation Jew. He observed his father's sins and deliberately went in the opposite direction. In fact, his behavior is very similar to his grandfather.

**18:19 "Yet you say, 'Why should the son not bear the punishment for the father's iniquity?' When the son has practiced justice and righteousness and has observed all My statutes and done them, he shall surely live.**

**18:20 "The person who sins will die. The son will not bear the punishment for the father's iniquity, nor will the father bear the punishment for the son's iniquity; the righteousness of the righteous will be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked will be upon himself.**

Ezekiel asks the question he assumes his listeners would be asking: "Why should the son not bear the punishment for the father's iniquity?"

Ezekiel responds in order to counteract the fatalism of the people in their view of intergenerational sins. The one who faithfully follows Yahweh will live; he will not suffer the guilt for his parents' sins. Only individual acts of righteousness and sin are attributed to a person's account before God.

There is room for divine mercy, as verses 21-24 tell us.

**18:21 "But if the wicked man turns from all his sins which he has committed and observes all My statutes and practices justice and righteousness, he shall surely live; he shall not die.**

**18:22 "All his transgressions which he has committed will not be remembered against him; because of his righteousness which he has practiced, he will live.**

Ezekiel tells his people to find life by turning from sin and observing the ways of God. In essence, this describes repentance. The person who repents shall live.

**18:23 "Do I have any pleasure in the death of the wicked," declares the Lord GOD, "rather than that he should turn from his ways and live?"**

Verse 23 gives the basis of the exiles' hope. God takes no joy in the death of the wicked. His desire is that all find life and live. Even when Israel had been in rebellion toward God for generations, the door of hope remained open. Any generation could find the favor of God once again by simply turning from their sins and turning to God.

**18:24 "But when a righteous man turns away from his righteousness, commits iniquity and does according to all the abominations that a wicked man does, will he live? All his righteous deeds which he has done will not be remembered for his treachery which he has committed and his sin which he has committed; for them he will die.**

Just as sins can be abandoned, so righteousness can be abandoned. With the former, life is gained, with the latter life is lost.

Ezekiel has hereby repudiated the notion of a "treasury of merit or demerit" on two counts. First, one generation cannot build up such a treasure for another; each individual determines his or her own destiny by his or her own conduct. Second, an individual cannot build up such a treasury in one phase of his or her life and count on this to balance off a deficit later. In the words of Uffenheimer, "'just man' and 'sinner' are not concepts that can be calculated in quantitative terms, and in which the past either acts as a burden weighing down upon the present, or serves to relieve it. No, what is decisive in this regard, solely and exclusively, is the present of the given individual, his current moral status." The fate of the righteous and the wicked is determined by the present, the moment of judgment (Block, 583).

**18:25 "Yet you say, 'The way of the Lord is not right.' Hear now, O house of Israel! Is My way not right? Is it not your ways that are not right?"**

The expected response to Ezekiel's message is rejection. "The response to Ezekiel's foregoing appeal to choose life instead of death demonstrates that the people's problem was not primarily cosmological but theological. While they claim to be victims of an immutable universal law that locks their fate to the conduct of their parents, they really perceive themselves to be at the mercy of a capricious God, whose actions are unpredictable and arbitrary" (Block, 585).

Ezekiel responds strongly in the next three verses.

**18:26 "When a righteous man turns away from his righteousness, commits iniquity and dies because of it, for his iniquity which he has committed he will die.**

**18:27 "Again, when a wicked man turns away from his wickedness which he has committed and practices justice and righteousness, he will save his life.**

**18:28 "Because he considered and turned away from all his transgressions which he had committed, he shall surely live; he shall not die.**

**18:29 "But the house of Israel says, 'The way of the Lord is not right.' Are My ways not right, O house of Israel? Is it not your ways that are not right?"**

The problem was not with God, it was with them. They were the ones who had abandoned the ways of God and were suffering for it. Their hope is not to argue and give up; it is to repent.

**18: 30 "Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, each according to his conduct," declares the Lord GOD. "Repent and turn away from all your transgressions, so that iniquity may not become a stumbling block to you.**

**18:31 "Cast away from you all your transgressions which you have committed and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! For why will you die, O house of Israel?"**

**18:32 "For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies," declares the Lord GOD. "Therefore, repent and live."**

Block applies chapter 18 section as follows:

First, Ezekiel repudiates any systemic doctrine of sin and retribution that would allow one person to blame another for his or her fate. To be sure, parents need to be reminded of the old *traditum*: God holds them responsible for the welfare of their children. But children may not hide behind a theology of corporate solidarity and moral extension that absolves them of personal responsibility for their own destiny. Neither the sentence of death for offspring of the wicked nor the promise of life for the progeny of the righteous is inevitable. In as much as each person dies for his or her own sin, and lives by his or her own righteousness, each individual is master of his or her own destiny.

Second, Ezekiel repudiates any doctrine of eternal security and eternal damnation that would hold a person captive to the decisions of the past. Both sequences - rebellion and death for the wicked and righteousness and life for the pious- may be arrested at any time. People may not bank on a treasury of past good deeds to ensure their future well-being, nor need they despair of a treasury of evil that prevents them from enjoying life. The appeal to "repent and live" assumes real personal freedom to determine at any time not only one's own conduct but also the destiny that God decrees for a person.

Third, Ezekiel repudiates any doctrine that would accuse God of scrupulosity and capriciousness. His moral universe runs according to fixed rules, which this text affirms to include the following: (a) The person who sins dies for his or her own sin. (b) Righteousness is expressed primarily by right action (rather than creedal assent). (c) Those in authority and those with means will be held accountable for the way in which they have treated the marginalized members of society. (d) A person's past behavior need not determine his or her future well-being. (e) God is on the side of life for all, rather than death for any.

Fourth, Ezekiel repudiates any doctrine that would perceive God as primarily bent on judgment and death. This gospel is clearest in his promises of hope, and his declarations that he stands on the side of life, not death, but it is also present in his warnings of judgment. After all, to be forewarned is not only to be reminded of the peril of one's course but also to be directed to the way of escape. God's mercy and grace move him to plead with men and women to accept that way, to repent of their sin and find life in him.

Fifth, Ezekiel repudiates any doctrine of ministry that encourages a prophet to proclaim only what people want to hear. People in despair need a message of hope, and those wrapped up in their own

miseries need a vision of God's mercy. If a doctrine of cheap grace is to be rejected by the rank and file in God's kingdom, the minister must certainly lead the way. But one's appreciation for grace will be directly proportional to one's consciousness of sin. A prophet does no one a favor by promoting a sense of well-being when one is governed by the law of sin and death. For those under this sentence there is no substitute for a pointed call for repentance.

Sixth, Ezekiel repudiates any doctrine that claims that God's covenant with Israel is over. For his audience in exile its benefits have been suspended, to be sure. But underlining Yahweh's passionate appeal for the nation's corporate repentance and revival is his commitment to his people. He has given his word and he longs for the day when they will reciprocate.

(Block, NICOT, Ezekiel, vol. 1, 589-590)

## Ezekiel 19

Ezekiel 19 is a summation of the fate of Judah's last kings. 12:1-16 dealt with the fate of Zedekiah; 17:1-24 describes the fortunes of Jehoiachin and Zedekiah; chapter 19 speaks of a number of kings. Ezekiel is primarily concerned with the fate of the kings of Judah in particular.

**19:1** *"As for you, take up a lamentation for the princes of Israel*

**19:2** *and say, 'What was your mother? A lioness among lions! She lay down among young lions, She reared her cubs.*

**19:3** *'When she brought up one of her cubs, He became a lion, And he learned to tear his prey; He devoured men.*

**19:4** *'Then nations heard about him; He was captured in their pit, And they brought him with hooks To the land of Egypt.*

**19:5** *'When she saw, as she waited, That her hope was lost, She took another of her cubs And made him a young lion.*

**19:6** *'And he walked about among the lions; He became a young lion, He learned to tear his prey; He devoured men.*

**19:7** *'He destroyed their fortified towers And laid waste their cities; And the land and its fullness were appalled Because of the sound of his roaring.*

**19:8** *'Then nations set against him On every side from their provinces, And they spread their net over him; He was captured in their pit.*

**19:9** *'They put him in a cage with hooks And brought him to the king of Babylon; They brought him in hunting nets So that his voice would be heard no more On the mountains of Israel.*

The lament for Israel's princes is at one level pretty straightforward. The lioness in the opening verses of the psalm is the nation as a whole, which gave birth to the kings. Then as now, the lion was the king of beasts, and so it readily served as a symbol for the royal Davidic line (e.g., Gen. 49:9; Mic. 5:8).

Jehoahaz is the first lion in view. He was the only king captured and taken to Egypt (609 B.C.; 19:4; 2 Ki. 23:31-34). Some see the second lion as Zedekiah or Jehoiakim (Block); others see it as Jehoiachin (Carson). Seeing this as Jehoiakim has the advantage of not skipping a king. Furthermore, Jehoiachin only ruled for three months which makes it difficult to describe him as one who had "learned to tear his prey, devour men, destroy fortified towers and lay waste cities" (19:6-8). However, since he, not Jehoiakim, was brought to Babylon, Jehoiachin is also a good candidate on other grounds; though Zedekiah was also taken to Babylon, he was never really accepted as a legitimate king of the line of David. Nevertheless, he fits the full description most closely.

**19:10 'Your mother was like a vine in your vineyard, Planted by the waters; It was fruitful and full of branches Because of abundant waters.**

**19:11 'And it had strong branches fit for scepters of rulers, And its height was raised above the clouds So that it was seen in its height with the mass of its branches.**

**19:12 'But it was plucked up in fury; It was cast down to the ground; And the east wind dried up its fruit. Its strong branch was torn off So that it withered; The fire consumed it.**

**19:13 'And now it is planted in the wilderness, In a dry and thirsty land.**

**19:14 'And fire has gone out from its branch; It has consumed its shoots and fruit, So that there is not in it a strong branch, A scepter to rule.'" This is a lamentation, and has become a lamentation.**

In spite of the links to chapter 17, verses 10-14 is *not* another reference to Zedekiah, but to the fate of the nation of Judah from which rulers sprout (Block, NICOT, Ezekiel, vol. 1, 609). It is similar in thought to verses 1-9 only under a different imagery. The strong branches represent the Davidic dynasty. The nation had grown under God's care but had become arrogant. Thus Yahweh punishes her by uprooting her and casting her aside to be burned. With the burning of the plant the Davidic dynasty ends.

It is striking that the words do not simply portray the overthrow of a minor power by superior force, but the decline of the line and even the decline of the nation. That is part of the picture of the vine in Ezekiel 19:12-14. The nation itself became pathetically weak: "No strong branch is left on it fit for a ruler's scepter" (Ezek. 19:14). The worst irony is that the fire that consumed the vine's fruit "spread from one of its main branches": the allusion is to Zedekiah's rebellion, which in turn attracted the punitive expedition of the Babylonians. This not only put an end to the Davidic line, but virtually destroyed Israel's national identity for many years. Within the theology of Ezekiel's prophecy as a whole, of course, the ultimate cause of Israel's overthrow was God himself, acting in judgment. But here it is clear that the mediate cause of the nation's destruction was within itself. (Carson in the October 1 meditation of For the Love of God).