

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod  
Pentecost 4 and Father's Day  
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Sermon by Pastor Gary A. Pufahl  
***Greatness in God's Kingdom***

This is what the LORD God says. I myself will take part of the tip of the cedar and plant it. From the topmost of its shoots I will pluck off a tender sprig, and I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. <sup>23</sup> On the high mountain of Israel I will plant it. It will produce branches, bear fruit, and become a magnificent cedar. Flying birds of every kind will live under it. In the shelter of its branches they will nest. <sup>24</sup> Then all the trees in the countryside will know that I, the LORD, bring down the high tree and raise up the low tree, that I make the green tree dry up, and I make the dried-up tree blossom. I, the LORD, have spoken, and I will carry it out.

—Ezekiel 17:22-24

I'm going to guess that most dads want what is best for their children. Right? Not all dads are like that. No, some are horrible. Some are so selfish and self-absorbed that they can't look past their noses. But I think that for the most part, most dads want what is best for the children. Wouldn't you agree?

As a father, I find myself praying a lot for my children. Those of you who are fathers, I'm sure you find yourself doing the same. If you are anything like me, your prayers tend to ask God to protect and keep your children safe. I don't like to see my children in pain. Boy, they get in an accident, your heart goes out to them. We don't want to see our children in those circumstances.

Your teenage daughter comes home from a date, and she's crying because she got dumped by her boyfriend. Man, we want to put on the tool belt and fix the problem, don't we? We don't like to see our children hurt. It's painful. Not only for them, but also for us as parents. And so, often times we pray that God would take the hurts and the pain away, right? We ask the Lord to shield and protect our children from pain and hurt.

And that's natural. I mean, nobody prays for an illness when your child is healthy. Nobody prays that your daughter would get dumped, unless, of course, you didn't like the guy. But even then, we don't want our children to get hurt. No, we usually are praying for the reverse. We pray for healing. We pray for protection. We pray for happiness. Right?

But I want you to think about why you pray that way. Why do you want your children to be healthy and happy? Ask that question of yourself. Why do you ask the Lord to take away your illness or to give you a promotion at your job? Part of the answer to that question has to be that you want to live a fairly comfortable life, right? It has to do with your goals. We have goals in life to be happy. I want my children to be happy and healthy. So, I pray for those things for my children. And there is nothing wrong with that.

But God, our heavenly Father, has a different goal. Sure, it's connected to happiness, but in a way that is different from what we normally think about. God's goal, his finish line, his ultimate goal for your life and my life is to get us through the Judgment Day with the declaration "Not Guilty" on our account. Isn't that true? He doesn't have as his goal to give you and me a nice comfy life in this world. He wants to give you everlasting life with him. That's his goal. Oh, sometimes he accomplishes that goal by giving us health and happiness in this world. Sometimes he heals our sicknesses and gives us stuff along the way to make us happy. Sometimes those things are part of his goal to get us across the finish line to his arms.

But sometimes he needs to take things away in order to keep us on track of reaching that goal. Sometimes God knows that it is best for us to allow heartache and problems to come to us because he does not want us to be distracted from that ultimate finish line. Isn't that true?

Now, with that said, isn't that the same goal that you Christian fathers have for your children? That's the goal, isn't it? We want to stand at the finish line with our God. We want to be there together. We want our children to be there as well. So how does that happen? Well, sometimes there is a certain amount of pain and agony that must come in our lives so that we let go of the things that distract us from the ultimate goal.

I want to tie that thought to our text for today from Ezekiel 17. Permit me to put these words into some historical context. Approximately 1,000 years before Christ came into this world, King David ruled over Israel. And God came to David and promised that he was going to establish a family tree, a family line, that would endure forever. God was going to build a house, or a family line, from David. God was going to establish through David's lineage a kingdom that would last forever, a great kingdom.

And yet, in the midst of those promises, the people's hearts continued to deviate away from God. I mean, they were setting up idols all over in their lives, worshiping false deities, putting things ahead of God. The people were just about inviting God to punish them for their rebellious acts of defiance.

Well, 400 years after David, at the time of Ezekiel, God took them up on their invitation. There was a descendant of David who was on the throne in Judah. His name was Jehoiachin. And God was making it known that a foreign ruler by the name of Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon was going to storm into Jerusalem, take Judah's finest into captivity, and destroy the temple and the city of Jerusalem. God was going to bring pain and hardship and discipline into the lives of his people.

Well, in 597 B.C. the Babylonians attacked Jerusalem and took some people into captivity. Among those captives were King Jehoiachin and the prophet Ezekiel. So, when Ezekiel is bringing this message to God's people, he's already off in captivity in Babylon.

Is everybody with me so far? Okay, good. Now if you have a Bible with you today, you may want to open it to Ezekiel 17. This is the chapter we are looking at today, but I want to continue to give you some context in chapter 17. You will see God's discipline go into action against his people.

Look at verse 1. **"The word of the LORD came to me. <sup>2</sup> Son of man, present a challenging parable to the house of Israel. <sup>3</sup> Tell the Israelites that this is what the LORD God says."** God wanted Ezekiel to give a parable, a story, to the people to reveal to them what is going on. Here's the parable, starting with verse 3: **"A great eagle with powerful wings, with long feathers, and covered with multicolored plumes, came to Lebanon** (which is a reference to Jerusalem here. You will see that truth in just a little bit). **He took the tip of a cedar. <sup>4</sup> He plucked off the newest shoot at the very top of the tree, and he carried it to a land of merchants. In a city of traders he planted it."**

Now, later in chapter 17 God explains what the parable means. He says in verse 11: **"The word of the LORD came to me. <sup>12</sup> Tell this to the rebellious house. Don't you know what these things mean? Tell them this. You saw how the king of Babylon came to Jerusalem. He took its king and its officials and brought them back to Babylon with him."**

So that first eagle is Nebuchadnezzar who plucked Jehoiachin from his throne in Jerusalem and planted him in the foreign nation of Babylon.

Okay. Go back to the parable in verse 5: **"Then he took seed from the land and planted it in a fertile field, like a new plant beside plentiful water. He set it out like a willow twig, <sup>6</sup> so that it would sprout and become a spreading vine, low to the ground, so that its branches would turn toward the one who planted it and its roots would remain under him. So it became a vine and produced shoots and leaves and branches."**

When Nebuchadnezzar took Jehoiachin to Babylon, he put Jehoiachin's uncle, Zedekiah, on the throne in Jerusalem. Essentially, Zedekiah was a puppet king who was supposed to pay tribute to Nebuchadnezzar. Zedekiah was the vine in this parable.

Well, if you go to verse 13, you can see God's description of this. **"Then he (that's Nebuchadnezzar) took a member from the seed of the royal family (that's Zedekiah), made a covenant with him, and put him under an oath. He took away the leading men of the land <sup>14</sup> so that it would be a lowly kingdom, so that it would not rebel but would keep the covenant with him, so that it could survive."**

But Zedekiah did not keep his covenant with Nebuchadnezzar. In fact, he looked to Egypt as a refuge to be delivered from Babylon. That's the next part of the parable. Look at verse 7: **"But there was another great eagle with powerful wings and many plumes. Look at how this vine bent its roots toward him! From the bed where it had been planted, it stretched out its branches toward him, so that he could water it. <sup>8</sup> It had been planted in good soil beside plentiful water to grow branches, to bear fruit, and to become a magnificent vine."**

The second eagle is the Pharaoh of Egypt. And God, once again, describes what will happen, starting in verse 15: **"But the prince (that's Zedekiah) rebelled against that king (that's Nebuchadnezzar) by sending his envoys to Egypt to obtain horses and a large army. Will he thrive? Can someone who does such things escape? Can he break a covenant and still escape? <sup>16</sup> As I live, says the LORD God, in the land of the king who made him king, whose oath he despised and whose covenant he broke, in his presence in Babylon, he shall die. <sup>17</sup> He will not be joined by a mighty army or a great force during the war, because Pharaoh will not come when the enemy heaps up ramps and builds siege walls in order to cut off many lives. <sup>18</sup> The king despised the oath by breaking the covenant. Even though he had given his hand to seal the covenant, he did all these things. He shall not escape!"**

And that's what happened to Zedekiah. He tried to escape from Nebuchadnezzar, but he was caught. His sons were killed right before his eyes, and then *his* eyes were gouged out so the last thing he would see was the death of his family. Then Zedekiah was taken into captivity and Jerusalem was destroyed. That took place in 586 B.C.

Alright, let me pause there for a second. This doesn't sound very uplifting, does it? And it's not. But there is something very important that I want you to notice about our God. God is not primarily concerned about our comfort here in this world. He has an eternal goal in mind. His people were going away from him. They were sinning against him. Even

though they had made a covenant to be faithful to him all their lives, they broke that covenant. They did not keep their promises. They sinned.

My friends, God wants us to keep our promises. There have been many times in my life where I have made promises. I think about my confirmation day. And you can think about your confirmation day, too. I made a promise before God and the congregation that I would be faithful to the Lord and his Word. With the help of God, I would follow and live God's will and commands in my life.

I made a promise to my wife on our wedding day that I would always be faithful to her, that I would put her ahead of myself. I've made promises to my children. I've promised to be there for them and to lead them in the ways of the Lord. I've promised that I would follow God and live my life for him and according to his ways. We make promises all the time.

But I look back on my life, and I'm sure you can put yourself there too, and I see times where I have broken my promises. I have not always been faithful. I have sinned against God. I have broken his commandments. I have not always loved my wife and children more than myself. I am guilty of sin.

And because of that, what would I rightly deserve? Destruction. Separation. Judgment, just like Israel and her kings. And just like Israel and her kings, I can't make things right with God. And neither can you. Just notice that in these words. Things did not look good for God's people. It looked very hopeless, and they were very helpless. But then we come to the words of our text for today, and God gives us hope.

You see, our hope and our greatness does not rest in us. Our hope and our greatness rests in God and his promises. And here is where we pick up the words of our text for today.

**"This is what the LORD God says. I myself will take part of the tip of the cedar and plant it. From the topmost of its shoots I will pluck off a tender sprig, and I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. <sup>23</sup> On the high mountain of Israel I will plant it. It will produce branches, bear fruit, and become a magnificent cedar. Flying birds of every kind will live under it. In the shelter of its branches they will nest. <sup>24</sup> Then all the trees in the countryside will know that I, the LORD, bring down the high tree and raise up the low tree, that I make the green tree dry up, and I make the dried-up tree blossom. I, the LORD, have spoken, and I will carry it out."**

Only the Lord could give hope and a future to a people who looked so hopeless. God himself takes a shoot from top of the cedar tree. He takes someone from David's family tree. Nebuchadnezzar took Jehoiachin and planted him in Babylon. God takes someone else and plants him on a high and lofty mountain in Israel. This descendant of David is, of course, a picture of Jesus. The prophet Isaiah gives a similar picture when he says, **"A shoot will spring up from the stump of Jesse, and a Branch from his roots will bear fruit"** (Isaiah 11:1).

Jesse was David's dad. So, according to his human nature, Jesus is a descendant of David. And here's the key to Ezekiel's picture. Jesus did what no one else could do. He carried out God's saving plan. But God's way of bringing that salvation is not how we humans would think. Jesus grows into the splendid cedar tree that feeds and shades all who are under its branches not in any way human wisdom could imagine.

He says, **"I, the LORD, bring down the high tree and raise up the low tree... I make the green tree dry up, and I make the dried-up tree blossom."** Just think about Jesus' life. Jesus appeared to be a low, dried-up tree. By faith we know that the man, Jesus, is our God and Lord. But he hid his divine glory and power during his life.

Consider the way he lived. He was not born in a palace, but he was laid in a manger, from where animals fed. He grew up in the backwaters of Israel in a town called Nazareth. When he began his ministry, the rich and powerful did not follow him, but the poor and the outcasts did.

Consider Jesus' death. He was arrested, condemned, and crucified, nailed to a cross. Isn't a dry, sunbaked tree, standing naked against the horizon, a fitting reminder of his God-forsaken death?

But the Lord makes the low tree tall and the dried-up tree green. Jesus came back to life. He rose from the dead. He is exalted to the highest place, ruling all with God's almighty power.

And here's the greatest part of all this. He did all that for you. He felt the itchy hay on his soft, newborn skin for you. He walked the dusty streets of Nazareth and Judea for you. His perfect, sinless life counts for you and covers your sins. He felt the nails pierce his hands for you. He carried the curse of all sins for you. He paid the full price in our place. He rose in victory because God forgives you. He rules all things for his people, for you and for me. Only Jesus can save. He came to save you. He so was focused on his goal of bringing eternal salvation for you.

And only Jesus keeps you safe under his branches. Referring to Jesus as that cedar tree, the text says, **"On the high mountain of Israel I will plant it. It will produce branches, bear fruit, and become a magnificent cedar. Flying birds of every kind will live under it. In the shelter of its branches they will nest."** In the shade of Jesus, in the shadow of his cross we find shelter from God's anger against our sin because Jesus has taken the full heat of God's

justice in our place. In the shade of Jesus, in the cool of his empty tomb we find renewal for Jesus' resurrection declares God's verdict that he forgives and acquits you. You have a new life.

Jesus brings all this to you through the fruit that he bears for you to eat. He feeds you through his gospel in Word and sacrament. It is the good news that your sins are forgiven. He promises in your Baptism that you are born again into God's family and clothes you with Jesus' perfect life. He reassures you in his Supper that his body, which you eat, was given, and his blood, which you drink, was poured out for the forgiveness of sins.

And he wants these comforting truths to go out to all people, starting in your very own homes. And, my friends, right there is where you can see what truly makes a great dad. Sharing the good news of Jesus by the way you live and the words you speak is the greatest service you can give to your family and the people in your lives.

So, what is greatness in God's kingdom? Well, it starts with humility. We humble ourselves before the Lord. We see our sin. It is so powerful to admit our sin before God and each other and to trust in the forgiveness that God gives to us in Jesus. Children need to see dads do that.

And then we trust in our heavenly Father. He wants only one thing. He wants people to be saved. He wants people to be with him forever. Sometimes we go through some uncomfortable situations because our God wants to lead us from a devastating end to his glorious kingdom. That's how much your heavenly Father loves you. And this is how we can be great in his kingdom. Point people to Jesus as the promised Savior of all. Amen.