

The Lord Makes the Dry Flourish

Ezekiel 17:22-24

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Text: ²²Thus 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 top-most of its young twigs a tender one, and I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. ²³On 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. ²⁴And 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."

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen. You don't hear the word "sprig" every day, but this is how our Old Testament reading from Ezekiel begins. The Lord takes a **sprig** from the lofty top of the cedar. The sprig is the topmost crown of a special shoot or tender branch of a tree (Block, Daniel I., *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Ezekiel Chapters 1-24*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997: 550) – full of life – and because it is at the very top it represents the head and in this case it represents the coming Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ.

Here is a picture of a sprig and imagine it in your mind's eye coming out on the very top of a cedar tree:



Other Old Testament prophets in addition to Ezekiel used this kind of imagery for the coming Lord. Isaiah described a "shoot" or "branch" in Isaiah 11:1. Jeremiah refers to a "sprout" in Jeremiah 23:5, 33:15. And Zechariah does the same at Zechariah 3:8 and 6:12.

So what is this picture language all about? It's fantastically relevant and significant. This is because of what God's people – the nation of Israel – had become and had been reduced too. No longer were they strong as God's nation, but were now in captivity. They were not as a green, living, strong, and healthy branch, but they were defeated and dry like this:



This picture is a picture of dry and dead cedars. How did this happen? The dryness came over Israel because she was unfaithful to the Lord. While the imagery in Ezekiel chapter 17 is intriguing and informative, it is the imagery in Ezekiel chapter 16 that is really disturbing. There in chapter 16 Israel is a faithless bride. Her shame is that she became a prostitute. It is a shameful and defeating picture of what happened to the people of God.

God's people had a king named Zedekiah who tried to be independent of Babylon when the Lord permitted Babylon to be in power. Zedekiah was ambitious and was not humble. His ambition was doomed to fail and it did. One commentator explains: "The barefaced way in which Zedekiah broke his oath...is a clear example of how men refuse to conform to God's decisions, and of how, while breaking laws sanctified by God himself, they strive by false and faithless methods of their own...". (Eichrodt, Walther, *The Old Testament Library: Ezekiel*, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1970: 230)

We are like Zedekiah and want to be our own kings, call our own shots and depart from the ways of the Lord. In our sin we want to be our own authority while rejecting God's authority. In our sin, we are the "barefaced" ones who don't mind not conforming to the Creator's decisions and will. Our pride and ambition also lead us to a state of dryness, because sinners apart from the Author of Life cannot water themselves.

But Ezekiel went on to prophesy in verse 24: "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." And all of this played out in history: King Zedekiah was the high tree made low, and the lowly king Jehoiachin who was languishing in captivity in Babylon would be made high. His line would live! His line

would be restored to the throne of Israel and there would be a Son who would be elevated to the status of King of Kings and Lord of Lords even the Lord Jesus Christ!

And this work benefits “every bird” (23) and “all the trees”...that is, all the world, all the world full of sinners. And this Savior planted to save us from our sin will be the shelter for all people! All who take refuge in this One find shelter under this perfect cedar of life. “The nations will either bow in sincere faith or break in humiliation (cf Php 2:10-11)...Christ and the sinner changing places...so that none may boast but confess that it was all pure grace (cf Lk 1:46-55; 1 Co 1-2).” (The Lutheran Study Bible, 1337)

It must be out of pure grace, because notice who does all the work: when we are dry, helpless, and without strength, hear the grace: The Lord says, “I myself will take the sprig...and will set it out,” (22); “I myself will plant it,” (22); “I will bring low the high tree,” (24); “[I will] make high the low tree,” (24); “[I will] dry up the green tree,” (24); “[I will] make the dry tree flourish,” (24); and finally the words – so clear, so powerful – “I will do it.” (24) This is grace, the work of God and why you are saved. In this saving work for you God has guaranteed you that you will live in the eternal Zion that is on the highest mountain; that is the city of God is your eternal city by grace through faith in Jesus!

How important is this Old Testament message to us today? Can we properly value it? It is invaluable! “What might seem unlikely to happen on the human plane was guaranteed by God’s pledge. In fact, the humiliating destruction...in fulfillment of his word, brought its own confirmation of his providential power to restore and glorify.” (Leslie Allen, *Word Biblical Commentary: Ezekiel 1-19*, Volume 28, Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1994: 261)

And this is the real lesson: it is realizing through faith what God does when things appear hopeless and unlikely. But the Lord says in our epistle through St. Paul describing all of you the people of God: “[you] walk by faith, not by sight.” (2nd Corinthians 5:7) And from our Gospel from St. Mark chapter 4: “It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth.” (v 31) It seems so small, so low, so unlikely to produce anything. And yet: “when it is sown it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.” (v 32)

But when we start off seeing dry branches (even dead branches) like in Ezekiel; when we see only the body that dies/the tent that is destroyed like from our epistle; or when we see meager and tiny resources like in the case of the unimpressive mustard seed, how can we hope? What is there to realistically expect?

This is what confronts us right? How often does this happen? Listen to the chorus of despairing Christians. Listen to how far gone our country is! And in a way this is good, because the Lord does not call you to trust in man or a country, or any human resource...but to trust

only in Him, but on the other hand, how we are trained on what we see. Like Israel when all they saw was a dead cedar and dead branches. It is easy to feel distress.

The dryness can quite simply seem overwhelming at times. What will happen to us in our country? Recently, one of the most successful young entertainers in our country, Miley Cyrus was interviewed about her views on sexuality. She was emphatic that she relates to *neither* boy *nor* girl. Her position was a bold denial of the idea of gender altogether. Think about it. Could there be a greater rejection of God's creation? She spoke of the way she was raised by "conservative" parents; parents who did not want her to "go to hell," but – however – at the end of the day loved her more than "any god." In her words was her own rejection of any god, (and esp. by implication, the true God). And millions purchase her music and admire her. What has happened to our culture?

Our LC-MS president Matthew Harrison recently sent out a letter to the pastors of our church. He asked us to pray and to begin to prepare for what might come out of the Supreme Court decision regarding same-sex marriage in America. In that letter he quoted Hermann Sasse from his work *Union and Confession*, 1936:

The lie is the death of man, his temporal and his eternal death. The lie kills nations. The most powerful nations of the world have been laid waste because of their lies. History knows of no more unsettling sight than the judgment rendered upon the people of an advanced culture who have rejected the truth and are swallowed upon in a sea of lies. Where this happens, as in the case of declining pagan antiquity, religion and law, poetry and philosophy, life in marriage and family, in the state and society – in short, one sphere of life after another falls sacrifice to the power and curse of the lie. Where man can no longer bear the truth, he cannot live without the lie. Where man denies that he and others are dying, the terrible dissolution [of his culture] is held up as a glorious ascent, and decline is viewed as an advance, the likes of which has never been experienced.

It is like Zedekiah who could not accept God's established structure. Such rebellion leads to destruction. The great cedar turns dry. The nation turns to death as its god. The news is not good.

But what is amazing is what God does about it. As much as my stomach turns towards what Miley Cyrus said, it doesn't mean that the Lord does not remind me of our mission and our message: God Himself takes over. He Himself has taken a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar and He has already brought the dead cedar back to life. The blood of Jesus covers all sin. He is the God who raises the dead. He is the God who loves rebellious sinners; He is the God who saves the ungodly. He reminds us that He loved Miley Cyrus and all the rest of us sinners so much that He gave His only Son...Jesus was sent to make the dry tree green.

What are you called to do in the face of a nation turning dry? What would you do if you met Caitlyn Jenner face-to-face? What would you say? Would he or she be the enemy? Would you be mindful that Christ died for him too? Would you assume to only see what is dry and dead and lose all hope and act like it? Or would you remember that God came to the dead and the lost to save? The enemy spreads the lie, but the Church – and all of her members like you and me – are called to spread the truth: God’s love is unconditional, so we must begin with love...taking the time to be like our Savior who went to sinners and ate with them...sinners like you and me.

If we can do this, then we can share the Word of Christ and this Word of Christ does not segregate humanity...instead we find all of us under the same category: “sinner”...and then we find ourselves all under the same category: “forgiven.” And when this hits us, then we want to know about how we may please our Heavenly Father. And we find that we do not please Him when we abide in hatred...so we repent. We find that we do not please Him when we deny His created order...so we repent. We realize that we do not please Him in immorality...so we repent. We discover that we do not please Him when we rebel against Him...so we repent. But if we do repent, it is only because in grace He has planted us into Christ -- you are baptized! -- to make us very low trees into high ones; to make us very dry trees into flourishing green ones; to do what only He can do through the shed blood and glorious resurrection of Jesus for sinners to be saved from the dryness of death. Rejoice Christian, you are now flourishing with the life of Jesus, the glorious cedar who gives shelter to all the birds, to all people. “For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son that whosoever believes in Him will not perish, but have eternal life.” (Jn 3:16) Amen.