

The Rejection of the True Shepherd

Scripture: Zechariah 11:1–14

Code: 2167

INTRODUCTION

Zechariah 11 is a very sad chapter. It stands out in stark comparison to chapters 9 and 10. It pictures the Messiah (whom we know to be Jesus Christ) as a Shepherd. That's a familiar concept to us because the Old Testament talks about God as a shepherd. In Psalm 23:1 David says, "The Lord is my shepherd." The prophet Isaiah said that the Lord God "shall feed his flock like a shepherd; he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young" (Isa. 40:11). In John 10:11 Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep." Such passages in the Old and New Testaments have endearing beauty to them. But when you come to Zechariah 11, it is an exception to that rule. Zechariah presents an ugly picture of the rejection of the Messiah, the true Shepherd.

Through Zechariah God has promised salvation to Israel—a regathering and restoration in the land. But suddenly in chapter 11, the prophet of hope turns into a prophet of doom and judgment. He turns from the glories of the Messiah at His Second Coming to the national apostasy and rejection that occurred at His first coming, which is the main theme of the chapter. It helps us understand why the promises of chapters 9 and 10 didn't come to pass when Jesus came the first time.

LESSON

I. THE RAVAGE OF THE WAILING SHEPHERDS (vv. 1-3)

"Open thy doors, O Lebanon, that the fire may devour thy cedars. Wail, fir tree; for the cedar is fallen, because the mighty [glorious trees] are spoiled; wail, O ye oaks of Bashan; for the forest of the vintage is come down. There is a voice of the wailing of the shepherds; for their glory is spoiled; a voice of the roaring of young lions; for the pride of the Jordan is spoiled."

A. The Land

Those three verses are judgmental. They identify three different locations: Lebanon, Bashan, and Jordan. In the geography of Israel, that list begins in the north and descends to the south. It pictures judgment sweeping down like fire burning the vegetation in Lebanon and Bashan on down to the foliage around the Jordan Valley, where lions dwelt. The Holy Spirit used dramatic imagery to describe the ravaging of the whole land of Israel.

Zechariah was describing a fire of judgment that would consume the ungodly as a conflagration consumes trees. The trees symbolize portions of land. Lebanon was known for its cedars. The wood that was used to build Solomon's Temple was from the cedars of Lebanon (1 Kings. 5).

Moving down from Lebanon, which is on the northern border of Israel, we come to the area of Bashan, which is east of the sea of Galilee. It was known for its oak trees. Descending further south we come to the Jordan Valley, in which runs the the Jordan River, which extends from the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea. At one time there appears to have been dense, jungle-like foliage along both sides of the river.

I believe that the judgment God is speaking about here is an actual devastation. Although a literal fire that burns trees may not be involved, the devastation is not limited to spiritual judgment only. It includes the death of people as the land of Israel is being judged.

There's an inevitability to this judgment. In verse 1 Lebanon is told to open its doors, as if there's no

sense in resisting. The fir and oak trees might as well because cause if the mighty cedars, which are relatively inaccessible, go up in flames the other trees aren't going to be able to stand. When the high and the mighty are fallen, every lesser tree is going to be unable to escape. Some people have likened these trees to the leadership of Israel, assuming this is a spiritual judgment on the hierarchy of Israel, which includes the priests, elders, scribes, and runs all the way down to the common people.

B. The Lions

The "roaring of young lions" implies a repeat of the conditions after the captivity of the Northern Kingdom, when wild beasts began to multiply around the Jordan River (cf., 2 Kings 17:22-26; Jer. 49:19; 50:44). The lions dwelt in the thick foliage. The fierce young lions, which have voracious appetites, will roar when they see the coming devastation that will destroy their homes and food. Beyond that, the roaring of the lions and the wailing of the shepherds are poetic figures of the misery that will occur in the land when it's devastated. The idea of destruction is emphasized with a Hebrew verb meaning "to destroy" that is used three times in verses 1-3.

C. The Lament

1. The human response

Verse 3 says, "There is a voice of the wailing of the shepherds for their glory is spoiled." These may be literal shepherds who are howling because the pastureland for their sheep has been devastated. Some say that may refer to the spiritual shepherds of Israel, and that would certainly fit with other scriptural references to leaders as shepherds. But regardless of their exact identity, they represent the human response as God's great judgment comes upon Israel.

2. The historical record

What destruction is Zechariah 11:1-3 referring to? At what point in Israel's history did this happen? The best and oldest interpretation (held by ancient rabbis and many modern scholars) is that it is referring to the destruction of Israel and Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Approximately forty years after Jesus was crucified, the Roman army destroyed Jerusalem, killing 1,100,000 Jews according to Josephus (Wars 6.9.3). About sixty years later, the armies of the Roman emperor Hadrian destroyed 985 towns in the process of subduing the Bar Kokhba Revolt. These two devastations resulted in scattering of the Jewish people throughout the world. But because of God's sovereignty the Jews have been preserved as a people and it is only in this century that they have come back to their land. It is difficult to comprehend the degree of devastation Israel experienced. The Romans might have destroyed an entire civilization had it not been preserved by God. The siege of Jerusalem led to such atrocities as some Jewish people even eating their own children to avoid starvation.

II. THE REJECTION OF THE TRUE SHEPHERD (vv. 4-14)

I've studied many chapters in the Bible but one of the most difficult I've ever studied is Zechariah 11. The chapter's poetic style is difficult to interpret; however, its main theme is clear in spite of our lack of our understanding of some of the details. An important key to the chapter is understanding its style of prophetic utterance. In the Old Testament, prophets often prophesied by acting out a symbolic scene. Verbalizing God's revelation was not the only means of prophesying. For example, God instructed Isaiah to "take a great roll, and write in it with a man's pen concerning Maher-shalal-hash-baz [which means, 'make haste to the spoils']" (Isa 8:1). That was the name of Isaiah's second son, a symbolic demonstration of judgment upon Damascus and Samaria. God told Ezekiel to take a tile, draw the city of Jerusalem, and dramatically besiege it (Ezek. 4:1-2). While onlookers may have thought the prophet had gone crazy, he was acting out a message from God to them. In Zechariah 11, God uses the prophet as an actor, playing the part of a shepherd to illustrate the true Shepherd, Jesus Christ, and the rejection He encountered.

A. The Problem Expressed (vv. 4-6)

1. The command about the condemned (v. 4)

"Thus saith the Lord, my God: Feed the flock of the slaughter."

The Hebrew word translated "feed" encompasses the shepherd's responsibilities of leading and caring for his flock--along the lines of what Psalm 23 describes. In the case of Zechariah, feeding the flock would mean teaching the people. The prophet was a picture of the true Shepherd, who teaches His people the truth of God.

"The flock of the slaughter" is not a very endearing phrase. God identified His covenant people as a flock intended for butchering. It's as if he were saying, "Since Israel will one day reject My Shepherd, they are designated as a flock for butchering. But I'm going to give them a chance: I'm going to feed them and see if they'll eat." He instructed Zechariah to go to the people of Israel who, in God's plan, were destined for a horrible devastation. Nevertheless He wanted to extend His grace by feeding them one more time. That's essentially what Jesus did. Forty years before the great butchering of Israel, God came and tried to feed the flock, but for the most part, they refused to accept the Shepherd. Therefore, they became a flock for slaughter.

2. The condition of the condemned (v. 5)

a) Oppressed from without (v. 5a)"Whose possessors slay them and hold themselves not guilty: and they that sell them say, Blessed be the Lord, for I am rich."Verses 5 and 6 form a brief parenthesis. Those who slay the flock are the foreign oppressors. Although it's true that God sovereignly handed Israel over to the nations for judgment, it's also true that the nations are responsible for their cruelty. God may have designed Israel for judgment, but that doesn't mean when the nations superseded reasonable punishment that they were without guilt. In Jeremiah 50:17-18 the Lord says, "Israel is a scattered sheep, the lions have driven him away; first the king of Assyria hath devoured him, and last this Nebuchadrezzar, king of Babylon, hath broken his bones. Therefore, thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Behold, I will punish the king of Babylon and his land, as I have punished the king of Assyria." God had ordained the kings of Assyria and Babylon to judge Israel, but that made them no less guilty for the sins of cruelty that they perpetrated. That may be a difficult concept for our finite minds to grasp, but we'll just have to leave it in the hands of a just God. Zechariah says that the nations who slay Israel will "hold themselves not guilty." The Assyrians and Babylonians felt no remorse when they slaughtered Israel in the seventh and sixth centuries before Christ. Jeremiah 50:7 says, "All that found them have devoured them; and their adversaries said, We offend not, because they have sinned against the Lord." (Josephus wrote that Titus, the Roman general who led the siege, groaned when he saw valleys filled with the bodies of siege victims, "and spreading out his hands to heaven, called God to witness that this was not his doing" [Wars 5.12.4].) Those Gentile nations felt justified in inflicting punishment on God's sinful people. The Romans must have determined that what they were doing was a wonderful act of judgment. Zechariah tells us they mockingly thanked the Lord for the profit made from the spoils of the people they slaughtered. Josephus tells us that with the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, the Romans sold tens of thousands of Jews into slavery (cf., Wars 6.9.3). b) Ignored from within (v. 5b)"Their own shepherds pity them not."It was bad enough that the Gentile nations came in and slaughtered the people, but what made it worse was that Israel's leaders didn't do anything to defend their people or to avert their judgment. Israel's spiritual leaders had failed to teach the people the spiritual truths that could have led them to recognize their Messiah. Many of the priests, elders, and scribes were corrupt leaders who were guilty of despotic and hypocritical leadership. They were also guilty of becoming rich at the expense of the populace.

3. The consequences of the condemned (v. 6)

"I will no more pity the inhabitants of the land, saith the Lord, but, lo, I will deliver the men, every one, into his neighbor's hand, and into the hand of his king; and they shall smite the land, and out of their hand I will not deliver them."

a) An absence of pityIt's sad that foreigners made merchandise out of Israel. It's even sadder that their own leaders didn't care enough to teach them the truths of God. But the saddest thing of all is

that God Himself said He didn't pity them anymore either. Ichabod was written over the nation because God departed from it (cf., 1 Sam. 4:21). Because His people would reject the Messiah, God would not pity them. Rather, He would deliver His people "into [their] neighbors' hand," indicative of the civil strife that occurred within the besieged city.^b) An absence of protectionThe Lord also said He would deliver His people "into the hand of [their] king." Who was Israel's king in A.D. 70? Technically speaking, Israel had no king then, which might cause you to wonder how this prophecy could have been fulfilled in A.D. 70 They could have had a king when Jesus came, since as their Messiah He was and is the King of kings. But the people mocked Him. Pontius Pilate brought Jesus out before the people and mockingly said, "Behold, your King! But they cried out, Away with him, away with him, crucify him! Pilate saith unto them, Shall I crucify your King? The chief priests answered, We have no king but Caesar" (John 19:14-15). They made their awful choice and put themselves in the hand of Caesar, whose legions devoured them only a few decades later as a fulfillment of Zechariah's prophecy. The Jewish leaders had concluded that if they didn't get rid of Jesus and the controversy surrounding Him, the Romans would intervene and take over completely (John 11:47-50). It is ironic that to avoid a Roman takeover, they killed the real King--the very thing that ultimately brought about their destruction by Roman army.

B. The Parable Enacted (vv. 7-14)

1. The role of the shepherd (v. 7)

a) His teaching (v. 7a)"I will feed the flock of slaughter, even you, O poor of the flock." Verse 7 resumes the thought of verse 4. Zechariah apparently carried out his role as a shepherd and started to teach the flock of Israel, but only the poor listened. That is a prophetic parable of what happened when Jesus came to feed the flock. He recognized that fact when He said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit" (Matt. 5:3). In 1 Corinthians 1:26 Paul says that among those who are saved, there are "not many mighty, not many noble." The Hebrew word translated "poor" is used in an economic sense to refer to someone without any financial means. It is also used of someone who is physically afflicted with disease or socially afflicted with persecution because of his identification with God's people. It can refer to those who recognize their spiritual weakness. The poor in spirit--those who recognized their need of a Savior-- accepted His teaching. The religious leaders didn't. Mark 12:37 tells us that when Jesus taught, "the common people heard him gladly." John 1:11-12 says, "He came unto his own, and his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the children of God." It was the elect remnant of true believers who came to be fed by the Messiah and chose to follow Him. Commentator David Baron said, "He fed all; but the poor of the flock alone, those who were despised of men because they would not follow the pride of the high priests and scribes and Pharisees, believed on Him" (The Visions & Prophecies of Zechariah, [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1972], p. 392).^b) His tools (v. 7b)"I took unto me two staves; the one I called Beauty, and the other I called Bands; and I fed the flock." Zechariah continues acting out the parable by taking two sticks. Shepherds often carried two sticks, which are identified in Psalm 23:4 as a rod and a staff. The rod was thicker than the staff. It was used for beating off wild beasts. The staff was for gently retrieving the sheep that got caught in difficult places. The stick called "Beauty" means "graciousness" and the one called "Bands" means "unity," denoting a binding together of something. Christ the Good Shepherd expressed the love and grace of God by tenderly caring for His people, who were like sheep without a shepherd (Mark 6:34). Throughout His ministry our Lord demonstrated mercy and forgiveness. The stick called "Bands" or "Unity" speaks of Jesus' unifying ministry. As the Messiah, He came to gather the lost sheep of the house of Israel into one fold (Matt. 15:24). It was in that spirit that He fed the flock of slaughter.

2. The rejection of the Shepherd (v. 8)

"These three shepherds also I cut off in one month and my soul loathed them, and their soul also abhorred me."

Verse 8 is difficult to interpret. I agree with those who say the three shepherds refer to the priests,

elders, and scribes of Israel. I believe the Lord fulfilled the symbolism of bestowing grace and unity upon the populace, but when it came to the religious leaders He confronted their hypocrisy (Matt. 23). He "cut off" or disowned them with scathing denunciations. The time period of "one month" is best understood as referring to a short period of time.

"My soul loathed them" literally means, "My soul was short with them," referring to the limits of God's patience toward the unrepentant. So the phrase shouldn't be interpreted as referring to hatred. When Jesus came, He tried to gather His people into one fold but the religious leaders repeatedly rejected Him and finally succeeded in crucifying Him.

3. The response of the Shepherd (vv. 9-11)

a) Abandoning the unbelievers (v. 9)"Then said I, I will not feed you; that which dieth, let it die; and that which is to be cut off, let it be cut off; and let the rest eat, every one, the flesh of another."The Lord is telling those who refuse to believe that He will set them aside. The verse is reminiscent of Romans 1, which says that God gave them up to pursue their own sinful self- destruction. So the good Shepherd would gather in the poor (v. 7) but abandon the false religious leaders and all others who would not hear to their merciless enemies! That speaks of God's turning Israel over to the terrible judgment of A.D. 70. Josephus reported that during the siege, some of the starving inhabitants resorted to acts of cannibalism (Wars 6.3.4).b) Breaking the covenant (v. 10)"I took my staff, even Beauty, and cut it asunder, that I might break my covenant which I had made with all the peoples."God was saying that He would set aside His graciousness and cease His providential care for His people. Thus God allowed Rome to invade Israel.c) Confirming the Word (v. 11)"It was broken in that day; and so the poor of the flock that waited upon me knew that it was the word of the Lord."In A.D. 70 the staff of Graciousness was shattered and judgment came. "The poor of the flock" refers to the church, the believing community. Jesus warned them that God would judge the apostate Jewish nation (Luke 21:20-24). They were the ones who waited on the Lord, being submissive to His will. They knew judgment taking place was ordained by God.d) Being betrayed by the people (vv. 12-13)(1) The determination of the price (v. 12)"I said unto them, If ye think good, give me my price; and if not, forbear. So they weighed for my price thirty pieces of silver."So you don't think that God was too severe in His judgment of Israel, Zechariah prophetically enacts how His Shepherd will be treated. Jesus is pictured as asking those He came to shepherd what they felt He was worth to them. Although He came and healed the sick, raised the dead, taught the truth, and offered eternal life, the religious leaders valued Him at a mere thirty pieces of silver. Rather than ignore Him and give Him no price, the leaders mocked Him by offering the compensation paid for a slave that had been gored by an ox (Exod. 21:32). Their thinking Jesus' ministry was worth a slave's price heightens the severity of their rejection. Their contemptible evaluation was worthy of severe judgment because He was their King--the God of Israel in human flesh.(2) The distribution to the potter (v. 13)"The Lord said unto me, Cast it unto the potter--a lordly price that I was prized at of them. And I took the thirty pieces of silver, and cast them to the potter in the house of the Lord."That's exactly what happened to the thirty pieces of silver that the chief priest paid Judas for betraying Jesus. Guilt-ridden Judas went back to the Temple and threw that blood money on the ground. The priests gathered the money and used it to buy a field from a potter. That is recorded for us in Matthew 27:3-10. Only God could predict such events.e) Forsaking the nation (v. 14)"Then I cut asunder mine other staff, even Bands, that I might break the brotherhood between Judah and Israel."By symbolically breaking his staff of unity, Zechariah was prophesying that God would destroy the nation. When the Romans came in A.D. 70 many Jews were killed. Many of those who didn't die directly at the hands of the Romans died from starvation or at the hands of their own despairing countrymen. Following the fall of Jerusalem the children of Israel were dissolved as a national entity and were dispersed.The message of Zechariah is clear. Before the destruction of Jerusalem, God Himself would appear in the person of Jesus Christ, the True Shepherd, and attempt to feed His flock of slaughter. Only the poor of the flock would follow His Word and the rest, especially the leaders, would reject it. The good

Shepherd would have no more value to them than a common slave. As a consequence the people were given over to severe judgment, which included death, famine, war, civil strife, and the destruction of the nation. The nation went out of existence and the Jewish people were scattered all over the world because they rejected the true Shepherd.

Focusing on the Facts

1. In what role does Zechariah picture the Messiah in chapter 11?
2. Describe how the tone of chapter 11 differs from that of the previous chapters.
3. Why are the trees and shepherds in Israel pictured as wailing (vv. 1-3)?
4. What historical incident is the devastation of verses 1-3 referring to?
5. Although the Jewish were scattered over the known world, how has God's sovereignty worked to their benefit?
6. Is verbalizing God's revelation the only means of prophesying? Explain.
7. What did God command Zechariah to do in verse 4?
8. Identify the "flock of slaughter." Why did God want to feed the flock destined for slaughter?
9. Although God used other nations to judge Israel, does that mean they are not guilty? Explain.
10. What reaction did Israel's own leaders have toward the nation's impending judgment (v. 5)?
11. What did God say would be the consequences for Israel's rejection of their Messiah (v. 6)?
12. What king did the people of Israel automatically select when they rejected Jesus (John 19:14-15)?
13. What did the Jewish leaders do to avoid Roman intervention over the controversy surrounding Jesus? How did that backfire on them?
14. Identify the class of people who primarily responded to Jesus' teaching. Support your answer with Scripture.
15. Explain the significance of the two shepherding staves of Zechariah (v. 7).
16. How did Jesus "cut off" the religious leaders who "abhorred" Him (v. 8)?
17. When the nation of Israel rejected their Messiah, how was God's graciousness set aside (v. 10)?
18. Who were "the poor of the flock" who recognized the fulfillment of prophecy in the fall of Jerusalem (v. 11)?
19. Explain the significance of God's Shepherd being valued at thirty pieces of silver (v. 12).
20. Explain the symbolism of the staff of unity being broken (v. 14).

Pondering the Principles

1. Zechariah 11 paints a tragic scene of punishment. Those who witness and experience it wail as they see it approaching. As a just Judge, God rewards man "according to his deeds: To them who by patient continuance in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life; but unto them that are contentious, and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, indignation and wrath" (Rom. 2:6-8). When you share the gospel with others do you warn them about God's judgment of sin and the consequences of rejecting the Good Shepherd? Consider using a passage like 2 Thessalonians 1:7-10. Seek to have the mindset of the apostle Paul, who, knowing the terror of the Lord, beseeched people to be reconciled to God (2 Cor. 5:11, 20).
2. Meditate on Isaiah 55. Identify the elements of God's nature expressed in that passage. Verse 6 urges the reader to seek the Lord "while he may be found [and] while he is near." Pray you might gain that sense of urgency in leading others to our merciful God.

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