

# Good and bad shepherds

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Littlebourne - 12th January 2025 - Zechariah 11

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As we've been going through Zechariah, the general tone is one of comfort and encouragement for God's people. They are, at the time, rebuilding Jerusalem and the temple, re-establishing themselves after a long exile. This is the message of the first half of Zechariah - to have confidence and get on with it for God is with the people.

But now we come to chapter 11, the gloomy chapter of Zechariah, where the message is different. This is the pessimistic chapter, about judgement. We've seen judgement in the previous chapters, but it's mainly been judgement on other nations. This chapter is all about judgement on Israel, and it doesn't pull its punches.

## v1-3

*Open your doors, O Lebanon,  
that the fire may devour your cedars!*  
2 *Wail, O cypress, for the cedar has fallen,  
for the glorious trees are ruined!*  
*Wail, oaks of Bashan,  
for the thick forest has been felled!*  
3 *The sound of the wail of the shepherds,  
for their glory is ruined!*  
*The sound of the roar of the lions,  
for the thicket of the Jordan is ruined!*

The opening verses of Zechariah are poetic, and at first glance they would appear to fit more neatly in the previous chapter than this one. We saw in the last chapter judgement on the nations, and is this a continuation of that?

These verses do indicate a change though - this is now about the land of Israel. Verse 1 starts in Lebanon in the north, we move down through Bashan, the area northeast of the dead sea, and end in the Jordan area, the south of Israel. These verses are, it seems, symbolically covering the whole of the land of Israel - this judgement rolls down from the mountainous north to the lowlands in the south.

Verse 1 starts with 'Open your doors, O Lebanon' - open up, let the destruction in, this is where the fire is let in. We see the cedars of Lebanon, these giant trees, the greatest of the trees in that part of the world, are consumed by the fire, and this moves on to the smaller cypress trees and the oaks of Bashan, and the thicket of Jordan. The picture here is that as the great fall, so too those under them, those smaller, fall as well. And in the south, we see the shepherds ruined, as the lions are there.

So these verses are a picture of a destruction, a judgement, that sweeps through the land and affects everywhere and everyone, high and low, great and small. This is a cataclysmic event for Israel.

The most common interpretation of this chapter is that this judgement is referring primarily to the events following Christ's coming, particularly the judgement culminating in AD 70, that ended Israel as a nation at that time, destroyed the temple and scattered the people. As we go on, I hope we'll see why that is a reasonable perspective, though the principles here apply to all times and places.

## **v4-6**

*4 Thus said the Lord my God: "Become shepherd of the flock doomed to slaughter. 5 Those who buy them slaughter them and go unpunished, and those who sell them say, 'Blessed be the Lord, I have become rich,' and their own shepherds have no pity on them. 6 For I will no longer have pity on the inhabitants of this land, declares the Lord. Behold, I will cause each of them to fall into the hand of his neighbour, and each into the hand of his king, and they shall crush the land, and I will deliver none from their hand."*

In these next verses we see an acting out of a prophetic word. Prophets in the Old Testament both wrote down prophecy, used words to communicate what God was saying, but also were called sometimes to act things out in a prophetic way.

Think about when Ezekiel laid siege to a brick, or had to lie down for 390 days as an illustration (Ezekiel 4). Another example would be when Hosea was instructed by God to marry a prostitute in order to illustrate God's redeeming love for His wayward people. Or when Jeremiah wore a yoke to demonstrate the servitude to Babylon that the people would have to endure in exile.

In a similar way, Zechariah plays the part in a symbolic one man show type of thing. He acts out being the Messiah, and the Messiah's rejection. It's not quite clear how this worked, or what it really looked like, but this is the sort of thing that God is instructing Zechariah to do.

He is told, verse 4, to tend to the flock that is doomed to slaughter. God knows what's coming - that the people would reject Him.

The bad shepherds of the flock lead them to slaughter, the leaders of Israel in the first century didn't recognise the Messiah when He was right in front of them, they rejected Him. They became rich, they sold out - they in fact made deals with the Romans to keep their position and authority, whilst Christians were persecuted.

Verse 6 tells us that the people will fall into the hands of each other and their leaders.

Remember when the Jewish leadership in the time of Christ rejected Him - they didn't just reject Him, but they went further. John 19:14-15:

*14 Now it was the day of Preparation of the Passover. It was about the sixth hour. He said to the Jews, "Behold your King!" 15 They cried out, "Away with him, away with him, crucify him!" Pilate said to them, "Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but Caesar."*

They didn't want Jesus as King, so they got the king they wanted - a few decades later they faced the might of the Roman legions, led by Titus, who would then become caesar himself. They put themselves in caesar's hands, and got what they asked for in a sense. The campaign of Jewish war in AD 66-70 acted like the destruction we read about in the first three verses - a sweep from north to south, a cutting down of great and small.

This of course was not their intention. We read a little about their intention in John 11:47-48:

*47 So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council and said, “What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. 48 If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.”*

The Romans did take away both their place and their nation. They sought to keep their good and advantageous position with the Romans, but in doing so, encouraged their own destruction.

## **v7-9**

*7 So I became the shepherd of the flock doomed to be slaughtered by the sheep traders. And I took two staffs, one I named Favor, the other I named Union. And I tended the sheep. 8 In one month I destroyed the three shepherds. But I became impatient with them, and they also detested me. 9 So I said, “I will not be your shepherd. What is to die, let it die. What is to be destroyed, let it be destroyed. And let those who are left devour the flesh of one another.”*

Now Zechariah plays the role of shepherd, mimics being the Messiah in some way, laying down a prophecy for those that saw it.

He takes two sticks, or staffs to tend the sheep. These would be pretty stout sticks to guide animals, to protect them, to defend them from threats. Think about Psalm 23(v4):

*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil,  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff,  
they comfort me.*

These are comforts to the sheep, they are used to guide and protect them, they are something that should be a blessing.

Zechariah has two - one favour, or graciousness, the other is union or unity. The role that Zechariah is playing is one of bringing grace, and unification to the flock, to the people. In playing the part of the Messiah, the Christ, he illustrates the Messiah's purpose in gracious care and bringing together of the flock, like we read in John 10:16:

*And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.*

Now verse 8 is tricky - who are these bad shepherds?

Some think these shepherds are representative of prophets, priests and kings - of these different types of leaders. Others think that it's the Pharisees, Saducees and Herodians in the time of Christ. Maybe it's the priests, elders and scribes of that time. Or it could be some other trio, that leads people astray. It's not quite clear.

What is clear though, is that there is this reciprocal rejection. The bad shepherds reject the true shepherd, and in return, they are rejected by Him. The flock rejects the true shepherd and is in return rejected. And it all happens quickly - Zechariah says a month is all that it takes for this to happen. They despised Him - as was prophecied in Isaiah 53:3:

*He was despised and rejected by men,  
a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;  
and as one from whom men hide their faces  
he was despised, and we esteemed him not.*

Verse 9 might remind us of what Jesus says in Matthew 23:37-38:

*“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! 38 See, your house is left to you desolate.*

Verse 9 also says that they will consume each other - similar to the prediction in Jeremiah 19:8-9:

*And I will make this city a horror, a thing to be hissed at. Everyone who passes by it will be horrified and will hiss because of all its wounds. 9 And I will make them eat the flesh of their sons and their daughters, and everyone shall eat the flesh of his neighbor in the siege and in the distress, with which their enemies and those who seek their life afflict them.’*

This is literally what happened in the seige of Jerusalem, AD 70, as recorded by Josephus. During the seige, the city had no supplies and people resorted to eating anything they could - leather, grass, dung, and Josephus says that people even ate their own children in desperation.

## v10-12

*10 And I took my staff Favor, and I broke it, annulling the covenant that I had made with all the peoples. 11 So it was annulled on that day, and the sheep traders, who were watching me, knew that it was the word of the Lord. 12 Then I said to them, "If it seems good to you, give me my wages; but if not, keep them." And they weighed out as my wages thirty pieces of silver.*

Now, the staff of graciousness and favour is broken - as Christ was rejected, so the favour of God was withdrawn. The covenant protection that the people of Israel experienced is taken away, allowing the other nations to afflict them. Christ came, bringing this grace and favour, but nearing the end of His earthly ministry we see this in Luke 19:41-44:

*41 And when he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, 42 saying, "Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. 43 For the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up a barricade around you and surround you and hem you in on every side 44 and tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you. And they will not leave one stone upon another in you, because you did not know the time of your visitation."*

Then, in verse 12, Zechariah brings further depth of sin to the story. He, playing the part of the good shepherd, says that if they want, they can pay him as he deserves, but not if they won't. An opportunity for rejection - they can go their own way or follow him. But what do they do? They weigh out thirty pieces of silver.

Now this should ring bells - we see this amount in other places in scripture. First, we see it as the price of a slave's life. Exodus 21:32:

*If the ox gores a slave, male or female, the owner shall give to their master thirty shekels of silver, and the ox shall be stoned.*

This is saying, that rather than give the good shepherd his due, rather than even pay nothing, they will add insult to injury and say in effect 'your value is that of a slave'. And the other place we see this is of course the price paid to Judas to betray Jesus, where the implication was the same - this is the price of a nobody, a slave.

## v13-14

*13 Then the Lord said to me, "Throw it to the potter"—the lordly price at which I was priced by them. So I took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them into the house of the Lord, to the potter. 14 Then I broke my second staff Union, annulling the brotherhood between Judah and Israel.*

Remember what happened to those thirty pieces of silver that Judas was given? Matthew 27:3-10:

*3 Then when Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he changed his mind and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders, 4 saying, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." They said, "What is that to us? See to it yourself." 5 And throwing down the pieces of silver into the temple, he departed, and he went and hanged himself. 6 But the chief priests, taking the pieces of silver, said, "It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, since it is blood money." 7 So they took counsel and bought with them the potter's field as a burial place for strangers. 8 Therefore that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day. 9 Then was fulfilled what had been spoken by the prophet Jeremiah, saying, "And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of him on whom a price had been set by some of the sons of Israel, 10 and they gave them for the potter's field, as the Lord directed me."*

Both Jeremiah 19 and here in Zechariah 11 predict exactly what happened, as the price for Jesus's betrayal was thrown down in the house of the Lord, the temple, and then went to the potter, whose field was bought with it.

Verse 14 then predicts the consequences - the end of unity for Judah and Israel. In the decades following Christ's coming, the unity of Israel was totally destroyed. There were internal discensions and conflicts, until eventually in AD 70, the whole nation is conquered again, everything destroyed, the people scattered. Josephus again comments that they killed more of each other than died at the hands of the Romans, such was the disunity at the time.

## v15-17

*15 Then the Lord said to me, "Take once more the equipment of a foolish shepherd. 16 For behold, I am raising up in the land a shepherd who does not care for those being destroyed, or seek the young or heal the maimed or nourish the healthy, but devours the flesh of the fat ones, tearing off even their hoofs.*

*17 "Woe to my worthless shepherd,  
who deserts the flock!  
May the sword strike his arm  
and his right eye!  
Let his arm be wholly withered,  
his right eye utterly blinded!"*

With the rejection of the true shepherd demonstrated, Zechariah now plays the part of a foolish shepherd - a shepherd that does not care for the flock. This is a picture of the bad leadership of Israel, that neglect the weak, exploits the flock for personal gain, and abandons the responsibilities that come with being a shepherd.

But verse 17 tells us the consequences for this bad shepherd - the sword will strike his arm and right eye. He will lose his power, his strength, his arm, and his sight, his vision, his insight. He will face God's justice.

## Conclusion

The message of Zechariah is then fairly clear - there will be worthless shepherds that lead astray God's people, but there is a true shepherd also. Those that reject the true shepherd will face judgement and justice. There will be leaders of God's people that reject Him, and will in turn be rejected by Him.

The events of Christ's time on earth, and the decades following are directly in view here - from His coming to the people bringing favour and unity, to being rejected by the bad shepherds of His day, being bought effectively for the price of a slave, and that price being thrown back at them and used to buy the potter's field, all the way to the eventual cataclysm of the seige of Jerusalem and the judgement upon Israel that happened in AD 70. This is one of the clear prophecies of the Old Testament, that came true in the time of Christ.



And as much as it points to what happened then, the principles apply today. Today, we will bring judgement upon ourselves if we reject Christ - this is what ultimately happens to all who reject Him. This chapter is a warning for us, to avoid those bad shepherds, and a call to follow Him, the true and good shepherd.