

XX. The Price of Betrayal

April 19, 2020 Zechariah 11:1-17

Theme: Rejection of the Messiah, the Good Shepherd of Israel, results in devastating judgment and destruction for unbelievers, although He will preserve His remnant.

Aim: To understand the consequences of rejecting the Messiah, and to throw ourselves upon His mercy and grace for salvation.

Key Verses: ¹²Then 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. ¹³Then 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 (Zechariah 11:12-13).

Review

Last week our lesson focused on the portrait of our salvation that the prophet paints in Zechariah 10:6-12. Salvation is variously depicted as deliverance from bondage, restoration from rejection, and redemption from captivity. This salvation is entirely of God’s sovereign grace, which is directly stated in the declaration: *because I have compassion on them...for I am the LORD their God and I will answer them.* His sovereign grace is reinforced by the constant repetition of the refrain “I will”; from first to last, our salvation is from God alone. Our response to this gracious and unmerited salvation should be one of lasting joy.

The imagery of scattering and gathering provides a strong visual metaphor of God’s method of salvation. *From the scattered nations, God will gather a people to Himself, redeeming and restoring them in strength to walk in His name.* Indeed, as the prophet Zechariah portrays, our salvation in Christ is a new exodus; we have been delivered from sin and restored to covenant relationship with God, through His sovereign grace alone.

Introduction

The success of the Maccabean revolt against Antiochus IV Epiphanes led to the establishment of a more or less independent Judea, rule by the descendants of Mattathias, the father of Judas Maccabeus and his four brothers. This family of priests, called the Hasmonean dynasty, effectively controlled both the high priesthood and the political leadership of the Jews for five generations (from c. 165 to 63 BC). Eventually, the Hasmoneans adopted the title of “king” and acted as such, conducting wars to expand their territories, fighting within the family to gain privilege and position, and living as corrupt Hellenistic monarchs. During this period of time, the political parties of the Pharisees and Sadducees arose within the Jewish religion.

At the death of king Alexander Janneus in 76 BC, his wife Salome Alexandra became the queen of Judea until her death in 67 BC. Her elder son Hyrcanus II then became king, but within three months, his younger brother Aristobulus II challenged him for the throne. In the resulting civil war, Hyrcanus was backed by the Pharisees and Aristobulus was supported by the Sadducees. The conflict subsided when Hyrcanus agreed to be high priest with Aristobulus as king. However, Hyrcanus’ chief advisor, Antipater the Idumean, wanted to control the government of Judea, and he knew it would be easier to do if the strong-willed Aristobulus was ousted in favor

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of his more malleable older brother. So, Antipater convinced Hyrcanus that Aristobulus was trying to assassinate him, sowed other acts of discord and conflict between the siblings, and reignited the civil war.

Both Hasmonean brothers sought outside assistance from the Roman governor of Syria to the north, sending gifts and bribes for military support. This brought Judea to the attention of the Roman general Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus (Pompey the Great), who soon invaded Judea from Syria and sought to bring the country under Roman control. Like Antipater, Pompey realized that a weak Hyrcanus ruling as a client-king of Judea under Roman hegemony would benefit the empire, so he moved against Aristobulus. Pompey besieged Jerusalem, which ended with the capture of the city and the arrest of Aristobulus. Pompey became the second Gentile to enter the Holy of Holies in Jerusalem (after Antiochus IV Epiphanes). Recognizing that his entrance had defiled the temple, the Roman conqueror took nothing from it, and allowed the priests to purify the building and resume Jewish sacrifices. Pompey returned in triumph to Rome with Aristobulus as his prisoner. Judea was now a Roman possession, with Hyrcanus as the puppet-king under the Roman governor of Syria.

The Hasmonean dynasty came to an end in 37 BC when Herod the Great became king of Judea. Herod was the son of Antipater, the wily advisor of Hyrcanus. An Idumean (Edomite) by birth, Herod had been raised as a Jew and rose to prominence under the patronage of Julius Caesar and later Mark Antony. To cement his position, Herod married Mariamne, the granddaughter of both Hyrcanus and Aristobulus, putting aside his previous wife Doris and their son. Herod and many of his descendants are mentioned in the New Testament.

Roman rule of Judea continued during the first century AD; the presence of Rome is clearly felt throughout the New Testament. Luke mentions the registration of the emperor Caesar Augustus, which was conducted “when Quirinius was governor of Syria” (Lk. 2:1). When Jesus was betrayed by Judas Iscariot and arrested by the Jewish council, they turned him over to Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, for execution by crucifixion (Mt. 27:1-2). The apostle Paul was arrested by the Roman tribune Claudius Lysias and his soldiers in the temple precincts (Acts 21:31-33). Later, Paul is sent to the Roman governor Felix in Caesarea. While in custody there, Paul had audiences with Felix, King Herod Agrippa II (great-grandson of Herod the Great) and his wife Berenice, and Festus, the Roman governor who replaced Felix. As was his right as a Roman citizen, Paul appealed his case to Caesar, and eventually made his way to Rome.

Jewish unrest under the harsh rule of Rome increased during the first century AD. The Zealots were a political group that chafed under Roman domination and sought to rebel against their overlords. One of Jesus’ disciples came from this background, Simon the Zealot (Mt. 10:4; Mk. 3:18; Lk. 6:15; Acts 1:13). Hostilities eventually escalated as armed conflict broke out in 66 AD, when the rebels gained control of the Roman fortress in Jerusalem and massacred the garrison stationed there. In 67 AD, the Roman general Vespasian, sent by the emperor Nero to quell the rebellion, arrived in Syria and began his southward march to subdue fortified towns in Galilee before approaching Jerusalem.

Zealot refugees from the north crowded into Jerusalem, and soon factional infighting between the Zealots and the Jerusalem Sadducees erupted. The internecine conflicts were almost as damaging to the Jewish cause as were the Roman legions. The Roman legions proceeded south toward Jerusalem, but civil war broke out in Rome after Nero’s death in 68 AD, and Vespasian

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left Judea to return to Rome, placing his son Titus in command of the armies. By 69 AD, Vespasian had become the Roman emperor and Titus had invested Jerusalem under siege.

The siege of Jerusalem was long and bitter, both inside and outside the walls. Zealots burned a large cache of food in order to encourage the Jews to fight instead of negotiating peace. As a result, many Jews died of starvation, and Josephus, the Jewish historian, even records that residents of Jerusalem were driven to cannibalism in order to survive. For some unknown reason, Titus lifted the siege for a few days, which allowed many Jewish Christians trapped inside the city to escape to the town of Pella in the Trans-Jordan. But most of the Jewish defenders remained and were in Jerusalem when the seven-month siege finally breached the outer walls in the summer of 70 AD. After furious fighting throughout the city and the temple precincts, Titus took Jerusalem, destroying most of the buildings and leveling the Jewish temple after ransacking the valuables in the treasury. The city was put to the torch and the survivors were taken into slavery. Titus returned to Rome in triumph in 71 AD. The Arch of Titus, a commemorative structure engraved with the spoils of Jerusalem, is still standing and can be seen in Rome today.

Despite the great tragedy of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 70 AD, the Zealots continued fighting. Their last stand was at the desert fortress of Masada. After a long siege, the Romans took the citadel in 73 AD, only to find that all the defenders, almost 1000 souls, had committed suicide rather than being captured alive. Thus ended the political nation of Judea. Approximately 1.5 million Jews lost their lives in this conflict, which resulted in the destruction of the temple, the dissolution of the Jewish state, and the further scattering of surviving Jews across the Roman empire.

In chapters 9 and 10, the prophet Zechariah has sketched in broad strokes much of the future history of the Jewish people, providing accurate depictions of the Levant campaign of Alexander the Great, the Maccabean revolt and victory against Antiochus IV Epiphanes, and the advent of the Messiah, the coming Shepherd-King. The outlook of these chapters is very positive: there is blessing, strength, safety, security, victory, salvation, and rejoicing predicted for the heirs of the post-exilic generation. These prophecies were designed to give God's people hope for the future while currently living in uncertain times.

As we come to chapter 11, the tone changes and the prophecy darkens. In addition to hope and salvation in their future, there is also denunciation and judgment. The subject of this chapter is the rejection of the Messiah, the Good Shepherd, by the nation of Israel. In particular, verses 12 and 13 are a clear prediction of the betrayal of Jesus Christ by Judas Iscariot. In light of their denial of the Messiah, God pronounces His verdict upon His apostate people: He would withdraw His sovereign protection from them, resulting in the suffering and tragedy of 70 AD. The theme of Zechariah chapter 11 can thus be summarized as: *Rejection of the Messiah, the Good Shepherd of Israel, results in devastating judgment and destruction for unbelievers, although He will preserve His remnant.*

A. Shepherd's Lament (Zechariah 11:1-3)

¹Open your doors, O Lebanon, that the fire may devour your cedars! ²Wail, O cypress, for the cedar has fallen, for the glorious trees are ruined! Wail, oaks of Bashan, for the thick forest has been felled! ³The 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!

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The chapter opens with a poetic lament, a preview of the desolation that is to come. The lament depicts a tremendous storm, a hurricane with gale-force winds, coming from the north and proceeding southward toward Judea. Everything in the wake of this tempest is devastated and left smashed in its wake. Although the primary objects of this destruction are the vegetation of the land, trees and bushes are often used in Scripture to symbolize people and nations. Therefore, make no mistake about it, this unnatural storm, called up by the Maker of heaven and earth, is unleashed upon the land to bring about His judgment. Let the hearer be warned!

The storm starts north of Israel in Lebanon, which as we saw from 10:10, was within the original boundary of land promised to Israel (cp. Dt. 11:24). Lebanon was a beautiful territory (cp. Is. 35:2), and the crowning glory of her forests was the mighty cedar, renowned for its strength and hardiness. Solomon bought cedars from Hiram king of Tyre to use in the construction of the first temple (1 Kgs. 5:6-10; 6:9-20). In Scripture, the majestic cedar was occasionally used to represent the people of Israel (e.g., Ez. 17:3-4, 12ff.) as well as believers: “The righteous flourish like the palm tree and grow like a cedar in Lebanon” (Ps. 92:12). Today, the cedar tree is still featured prominently on the national flag of modern Lebanon.

But here in Zechariah, the cedars of Lebanon are in trouble. The doors of the land are figuratively opened, allowing a firestorm to sweep through and destroy the cedars. While they are strong, they are no match for the LORD:

⁴The voice of the LORD is powerful;
the voice of the LORD is full of majesty.

⁵The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars;
the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon (Psalm 29:4-5).

To the southeast of Lebanon lies Bashan in the Trans-Jordan. Before they crossed the Jordan river into Canaan, Moses and the Israelites defeated Sihon, king of Heshbon and Og, king of Bashan (Dt. 3:1-3). As a result, Bashan became the inheritance of the half-tribe of Manasseh (Dt. 3:13). Today, the area of Bashan is known as the Golan Heights. “Those who occupy this area have a commanding view of all of Galilee to the southwest and Damascus to the northeast” (Bentley, p. 189). Bashan was renowned for its pastureland (Num. 32:1), but it also had great forests as well. Verse 2 of the lament commands the cypresses (cp. Is. 14:9; Hos. 14:8) and oak trees (cp. Is. 2:13; Ez. 27:6) of Bashan to wail; having seen the doom of the fallen cedars, they know a similar fate awaits them as well. If the cedars cannot stand against the force coming against them, there is no hope for the lesser trees in the path of the storm.

The devastation continues southward, through the Jordan valley, which runs between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea to the south. Thick vegetation grew on either side of the riverbanks, which until only a few hundred years ago was the haunt of lions. But the lions roar in frustration, because their habitat has become uprooted, and the shepherds of Israel mourn, because their pasturelands have been destroyed.

This lament, which is a prelude to the main passage which follows in verses 4 to 14, is a highly poetic description of the devastation and destruction of war. The path of the storm from north to south is a common invasion route into Judea. Though the historical context of the lament cannot be ascertained from the imagery contained within it, the immediate context of the verses that follow strongly suggest that it is evocative of the Roman era of Judea’s history. However, commentators differ on exactly what historical event is intended. Those who either consciously or unconsciously believe that chapter 11 should be considered in chronological order, propose

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that the storm of verses 1-3 presages the Roman invasion of Pompey and subsequent annexation of Judea in 63 BC. For example:

This metaphor describes the storm of invasion, bloodshed, and oppression that should roll over Palestine after the glorious Maccabean era and before the coming of the Messiah.... The reference is to that desolating storm of civil war that caused the calling in of the Romans, whose legions swept like a whirlwind of steel over the land, and finally prostrated every vestige of independent authority, from the cedars of Lebanon to the lion-like spirit that refused to be subdued, and humbled the whole land beneath the mighty power of Rome (Moore, p. 252).

While the Roman subjugation and occupation of Judea was certainly a tumultuous event in the history of Judea, the scope of the destruction and terror brought out in this lament seem to be of a greater intensity and impact. Therefore, the majority of commentators rightly see this as preview of the disaster that would overtake the nation in 70 AD, which is described in greater detail in verses 4-14 which follow.

B. The Good Shepherd (Zechariah 11:4-14)

1. The Commission of the Good Shepherd (11:4-6)

a) *Command (11:4)*

⁴Thus said the LORD my God: “Become shepherd of the flock doomed to slaughter.

The LORD addresses Zechariah and commissions him: *become shepherd of the flock doomed to slaughter*. Before we can address the evocative phrase “flock doomed to slaughter,” we first must resolve several questions about this command.

First, what exactly is God requiring Zechariah to do? It seems as if he is being told to perform an enacted parable, that is, complete a series of actions that represent the truth of the message that God wants to deliver to His people. In this case, Zechariah would have to dress like a shepherd, carry around the staffs of his position, and interact with the people of Judea in a rather intense way (see verses 7-14).

Interactive prophecy was conducted by other prophets. For example, Jeremiah purchased an earthenware flask and broke it in the Valley of Ben Hinnom to illustrate God’s judgment upon Judah (Jer. 19:1ff.). Upon another occasion, Jeremiah put his neck in yoke-bars to symbolize the yoke that Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon would put on Judah and the surrounding nations (Jer. 27:2). A false prophet, Hananiah, tried to get into the act by striking off the wooden yoke from Jeremiah’s neck to symbolize that God would break the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar (Jer. 28:10-11). Unfortunately, that fabricated message didn’t come from God, and therefore Jeremiah pronounced judgement on Hananiah; within two months the false prophet was dead (Jer. 28:16-17; cp. Jer. 28:1).

The prophet Ezekiel likewise engaged in several very public scenes to illustrate God’s coming judgement and destruction upon Jerusalem. In chapter 4, Ezekiel was called to lie upon his left side for 390 days followed by 40 days on his right side in front of an engraved brick representing the siege of Jerusalem (Ez. 4:1-8). In chapter 12, Ezekiel packed an exile’s bag and dug through the city wall to symbolize the coming full exile of Judah (Ez. 12:1-7). Hosea, perhaps most

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famously of all, was commanded to marry a harlot to illustrate the spiritual infidelity of Israel toward their God (Hos. 1:2).

In these enacted parables by earlier prophets, the action depended entirely upon God's spokesman. Here Zechariah is commanded to "become a shepherd," but as the prophecy unfolds, we see other actors in the drama, particularly those watching the shepherd in verse 11 and those who weighed out thirty shekels of silver in verse 12. The "action" is not limited to Zechariah alone, so it is hard to visualize exactly how this parable could have been successfully enacted. For that reason, many commentators consider this passage to be primarily a vision or an allegory, in which Zechariah is asked to assume the central role. Ultimately, the precise way in which this prophecy played out is not as important as its meaning, which is independent of its means of transmission.

The second issue regards the identity of the shepherd that Zechariah is asked to portray. This question is more straightforward to address. We've already seen how the prophet uses the image of the shepherd both to portray the ungodly rulers of Judah as well as the coming Messiah, who is the Good Shepherd of His people. As the context of the drama unfolds, it becomes clear that the shepherd in verse 4-14 is none other than our Savior Jesus Christ. Specifically, the tragedy which is portrayed here represents the mission of Jesus to shepherd His flock and save His people, followed by the Jews' rejection of their Messiah, His subsequent betrayal at the hands of Judas Iscariot, and the unleashing of His wrath upon apostate Israel, culminating in the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. "This poignant section of Zechariah's prophecy should not be read apart from John 10, where Jesus claimed, 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep' (Jn. 10:11). Immediately following His exposition of what it meant to be the good shepherd, we are told of the unbelief and rejection of the Jews (Jn. 10:19-39)" (Mackay, p. 222).

The commission given by the LORD is for Zechariah to pasture the *flock doomed for slaughter*. Since Messiah is the real shepherd in this scene, the flock is clearly the people of Israel (cp. Ps. 80:1; 95:7; 100:3; Ez. 34:31). It is the mission of the LORD to minister to them in their affliction and distress, "for the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" (Lk. 19:10). However, this flock is "doomed" or "marked" for "slaughter." "These sheep are being raised to provide meat, and are soon to be sold in the market before being taken to the slaughter-house. But the sheep are men and women, suffering under oppression" (Baldwin, pp. 179-180). Even before Messiah comes, the house of Israel as a whole is already lost due to the bad shepherds that have been leading them.

b) Crimes (11:5)

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.*

Verse 5 expands upon the reasons why the flock of Israel is "doomed for slaughter." Three different roles are described here: those who buy the sheep, those who sell the sheep, and "their own shepherds." Clearly, *their own shepherds* refer to the civil and religious leaders of Judea, particularly in the timeframe of this prophetic drama, which is centered around the ministry of the Messiah, His crucifixion, and the aftermath on the Jewish nation. Zechariah says that these shepherds *have no pity* on the sheep, that is, the individual people of Israel. Instead, they are focused on their own selfish gain. This self-serving attitude is most clearly expressed by the ruling council of the Jews:

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⁴⁵Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him, ⁴⁶but some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. ⁴⁷So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council and said, “What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. ⁴⁸If 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” (John 11:45-48).

The Jewish leaders had already sold themselves to their Roman overlords, and all they wanted was to maintain their relative comfortable positions within the status quo, irrespective of how harshly Rome governed the Jews. Their concern was only for their own material comfort, not for the spiritual condition of their people.

The identity of the buyers and sellers is less certain. Some commentators see them as occupying Romans, “who used the Jews, as they did all their conquests, as mere merchandise, making from them the greatest possible gain for themselves” (Moore, p. 254). On the other hand, these merchants may refer to internal exploitation by the privileged in Jewish society. “The three groups mentioned—buyers, sellers, shepherds—are the powerful classes of the land, who repeatedly act in this way. They were able to do as they pleased because they were the authorities and would not act against themselves (Mic. 3:1-3, 9)” (Mackay, p. 212). Regardless of the identity, these buyers and sellers have made themselves wealthy at the expense of the masses. Their cry, *Blessed be the LORD, I have become rich*, is full of irony, since their affluence through the oppression of others is not a sign of blessing by God, but will result in His full condemnation.

c) Condemnation (11:6)

⁶For 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 neighbor, and each into the hand of his king, and they shall crush the land, and I will deliver none from their hand.”

Before Zechariah actually picks up his shepherd’s gear to enact his commission, God foretells what will happen to the *flock doomed for slaughter*. “From the outset it becomes clear that the shepherd’s effort to save the flock will be a failure” (Baldwin, p. 180). Indeed, the story of Israel under the Romans as poetically proclaimed in verses 1-3 and prophetically pronounced in verses 4-6 is one of unrelenting disaster. Baron explains:

There is a sad gradation in the wretchedness of the people thus given over to judgment as described in verses 5-6. First, the Gentile nations pity them not, but buy and sell and slay them as “sheep of slaughter.” Secondly, their own shepherds, from whom something different might have been expected, have no compassion for them; and thirdly, and most terrible of all, *I will no more pity the inhabitants of the land, saith Jehovah,*” for long-continued obduracy exhausts even the patience of Jehovah; and there comes a time in the history of nations and of individuals when the long-suffering God has to say “there is no more remedy” (or “healing”), and His righteous anger has to manifest itself in judgment (Baron, p. 385).

The absence of the LORD’s pity is a death sentence for the nation of Israel. But it is inherently just; even as the shepherds had “no pity” on the sheep, God will “no longer have pity” on them. This language echoes the pronouncement of God shortly before He gave the nation of Judah over to destruction at the hands of the Babylonians:

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¹⁵The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent persistently to them by his messengers, because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place. ¹⁶But they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words and scoffing at his prophets, until the wrath of the LORD rose against his people, until there was no remedy (2 Chronicles 36:15-16).

As will become clear in subsequent verses, God withdraws His pity on the land's inhabitants because of their rejection of His Son, the Messiah. The Babylonian captivity occurred after Judah rejected prophet after prophet sent by the LORD to call them to repentance. How much greater is the sin of Judea in rejecting their Messiah, and how much more severe their judgment!

Jesus Himself addressed His rejection in the parable of the wicked tenants. A landowner (God) leased his vineyard to some tenants (the Jews) and departed to a far country. From time to time, the landowner would send servants (the prophets) to request the fruit of the harvest, but the wicked tenants would mistreat them and send them away empty-handed.

¹³Then the owner of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him.' ¹⁴But when the tenants saw him, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir. Let us kill him, so that the inheritance may be ours.' ¹⁵And they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? ¹⁶He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others" (Lk. 20:13-16).

When the Jews rejected the "beloved son" of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, and killed him on a Roman cross, they forfeited all their covenant rights. It is a terrible thing to have the LORD's pity and compassion withdrawn from you. There remains no alternative other than judgment and condemnation.

The form of that punishment is spelled out in the latter part of verse 6. First, there would be civil chaos and strife under the leadership of bad shepherds: *Behold, I will cause each of them to fall into the hand of his neighbor.* This was fulfilled in the internecine strife between the various factions of Jews defending Jerusalem during the Roman city of their city. Instead of working together, they were at odds with each other, causing untold grief and suffering.

Furthermore, they would also be delivered *each into the hand of his king.* The Jews, in rejecting Jesus as their Messiah-King, embraced the Roman emperor instead:

¹⁴Now it was the day of Preparation of the Passover. It was about the sixth hour. He [Pilate] said to the Jews, "Behold your King!" ¹⁵They 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." ¹⁶So he delivered him over to them to be crucified (John 19:14-16a).

In choosing Caesar as king instead of Jesus, the chief priests not only sent Christ to the cross, but they also sealed their own fates. Caiaphas, the high priest, in response to the Pharisees' question about what to do with Jesus (quoted above), had replied:

⁴⁹"You know nothing at all. ⁵⁰Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish." ⁵¹He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation (John 11:49b-51).

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In choosing Caesar instead of Christ, the priests of Israel believed that they would save the nation (and especially themselves) from the wrath of Rome. Instead, they assured the wrath of God upon them. In His justice, the LORD allowed the legions of Rome to *crush the land*, to roll over Jerusalem, and to ground it to dust. The destruction was total, the devastation was complete, according to God's word: *I will deliver none from their hand*.

The judgment of God upon Judea, executed by the Romans in the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, was poetically proclaimed in verses 1-3 and prophetically pronounced in verses 4-6. Now it will be dramatically displayed in verses 7-14.

2. The Ministry of the Good Shepherd (11:7-8a)

a) *Two Staffs (11:7)*

⁷So 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.

In verses 7-8a, we have Zechariah's report on his role-play as *the shepherd of the flock doomed for slaughter*. Zechariah, picking up the mantle of the good shepherd, *tended the sheep* well, caring for and feeding the sheep of his pasture. "As the Good Shepherd, Zechariah went about his work.... He was concerned about the ordinary people of God, especially the poor and afflicted, just as the Messiah will be" (Bentley, p. 191):

He will tend his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms;
he will carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead those that are with young (Isaiah 40:11).

There is some controversy on how to translate the end of the first sentence. The ESV has *So I became the shepherd of the flock doomed to be slaughtered by the sheep traders*. Most other major English translations (e.g., NIV, NKJV, NASB) translate it this way: "So I shepherded the flock marked for slaughter, particularly the oppressed of the flock" (NIV). The NKJV has "in particular the poor of the flock," and NASB has "hence the afflicted of the flock." This same translation difference is also present in verse 11.

It seems preferable to understand this phrase as pointing to the poor, oppressed, or afflicted members of the flock, rather than to the merchants buying and selling the sheep, as this clause then provides a reason for the Messiah's shepherding. Baron points out that "the designation 'the poor of the people,' or as the word also means, 'the needy,' 'the weak,' 'the afflicted,' is almost invariably used in the Hebrew Bible of the pious or *godly* in the nation who are persecuted and oppressed by the godless" (Baron, p. 391). The "oppressed of the flock" would thus be the remnant of believing Israel that Jesus came to save. "The fact is set forth that Christ assumed the work of feeding the Jewish people, in order that He might save that remnant of them who were waiting for the salvation of Israel" (Moore, p. 256). In the gospels, we see the compassion of our Good Shepherd as Jesus tends the sheep of Israel:

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd (Matthew 9:36; cp. Mark 6:34).

As part of his shepherding gear, Zechariah took up two staffs, which were assigned symbolic names. The first staff was called *Favor* or "Beauty" or "Pleasantness," while the second was designated as *Union*, or "Bindings," or "Bands."

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Psalm 23 informs us that upon occasion, shepherds had two staffs: “Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me” (Ps. 23:4, KJV). The rod or cudgel was used to fight off external enemies, such as wild animals or thieves. This staff is represented by *Favor*, which protects the people of Israel from external harm from the nations. When this staff is later broken (in v. 10), the nations can come in, like wild animals or thieves, and grievously harm the flock. The second staff, the shepherd’s crook, was used to guide the sheep, rescue them from difficulties, lead them to safety, and keep them as together as one flock. This staff is *Union*, which symbolizes the well-being of the whole or united flock. When this staff is subsequently broken (in v. 14), internal discord and strife becomes rampant, and the flock is not united against their external foes, but devolves into internal squabbles and internecine fighting. The two shepherd staffs of the Messiah thus teach us that it is the providence of God that blesses or keeps His people safe from both external enemies and internal division.

b) Three Shepherds (11:8a)

⁸*In one month I destroyed the three shepherds.*

The work of Messiah continues in the first half of verse 8. Baldwin calls these words “probably the most enigmatic in the whole Old Testament” (Baldwin, p. 181). Both the action (destruction of “three shepherds”) and the time frame (“one month”) are ambiguous and not easily explained with historical hindsight. All sorts of fanciful identifications of specific individuals, from Seleucid monarchs to Hasmonean kings to Jewish high priests to Roman officials have been proposed. The time frame of one month has variously been understood as a literal month, or a short period of time, or thirty years (one year for each day), or other intervals of time. The plethora of possible combinations of these ideas is a strong indicator that none of them are correct.

A possible explanation treats the number three as a symbolic number of completion. In this view, Christ “destroys” or “deposes” all ungodly leaders who oppose His rule. While this interpretation is generally true, it seems to fall short of the context of the advent of Messiah in the midst of the Roman era.

The most satisfactory interpretation is also apparently the most ancient view among Christian commentators. The three shepherds mentioned in 11:8 do not refer to specific individuals, but rather to classes or groups of people, namely the three offices of the Old Testament: the prophets, the priests, and the kings (or civil rulers). The main advantage of understanding the text in this way is that it fits the context of the first advent of Jesus Christ. The three Old Testament offices were types that anticipated their fulfillment in Messiah. Jesus is the Word of God (Jn. 1:1) and the final Prophet (cp. Dt. 18:15); He is the Great High Priest, the final sacrifice (Heb. 10:12), and the one who always lives to make intercession for His people (Heb. 7:25); and He is the true Davidic ruler (Rev. 22:16), the King of kings and Lord of Lords (Ps. 2; 1 Tim. 6:15; Rev. 17:14; 19:16).

Upon His death, burial, resurrection, and ascension, the Lamb of God assumed these three offices forever. There was no further need for earthly prophets, priests, or kings; these human offices were made obsolete at the Cross. John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Christ, was the final prophet sent by God to announce Messiah (cp. Mt. 11:11-13). The last Davidic king had ceased ruling at the first fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC. While the Jews obstinately and sacrilegiously continued their priestly sacrificial system for another 40 years after the Messiah came, the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD put a final end to the Jewish priesthood. Within a

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relatively short period of time—Zechariah’s symbolic “one month”—the Good Shepherd destroyed the Old Testament types by ushering in their fulfillment.

The above explanation puts an interesting twist on the understanding of Messiah’s work. Zechariah is reporting the results of his dramatic role as the good shepherd who cares for the sheep of Israel. One would normally assume that his efforts would be to the benefit of the flock. That is why so many commentators have suggested the names of many different wicked rulers, since their removal would result in good to Israel. Baron elaborates:

Commentators generally view the cutting off of the three shepherds “as an act of God’s loving-kindness toward the sheep of His pasture,” and as part of the beneficent care of the Good Shepherd for the flock. So it might have been, if delivered from their false shepherds, the people as a whole had turned to Him who was sent to them of God to seek and to save, and who in His one person combined the offices of Prophet, Priest, and King. But as not only the leaders, both civil and religious, but the people in general, took up more and more an attitude of opposition and hostility toward Him, the “cutting off” of the three “shepherds,” or the abolition of the three mediatorial offices, which is the outward sign of the suspension of God’s covenant relationship with them, must certainly be regarded also as an act of judgment on the nation as a whole (Baron, p. 399).

3. The Rejection of the Good Shepherd (11:8b-11)

a) *Estrangement (11:8b)*

But I became impatient with them, and they also detested me.

Despite the loving care with which Jesus came and ministered to the lost sheep of Israel, that love was not reciprocated. They rejected their Messiah because they *detested* Him. What a tragic result! We’ve already seen the loathing with which the high priests and Pharisees displayed toward Jesus in their plot to kill one man in order to save the nation. But the “flock doomed to slaughter” also despised their true King:

Not only the false shepherds, but also the flock detested Zechariah! The people did not want a godly regime despite the benefits to themselves. How revealing this is! The people approved of godless rather than godly leaders. They did not want godly standards because they did not want to give up their own cherished sins. This is what we should expect of those who have lost the knowledge of God, even those born into the heritage of God’s people (Phillips, pp. 247-248).

Isaiah had also predicted the rejection of the Messiah, in his poignant description of the Suffering Servant:

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 (Isaiah 53:3).

Even sadder and more frightening is the attitude of the shepherd portrayed by Zechariah: *I became impatient with them*. His compassion has turned to impatience or vexation (cp. Num. 21:4; Jdg. 10:16; 16:16). We see this side of the Messiah when Jesus pronounced the seven woes upon the hypocritical scribes and Pharisees (Mt. 23:13-36). Our Lord ended that

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denunciation against the false shepherds of Israel with a lamentation over the people, who were lost and “doomed for slaughter”:

³⁷“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! ³⁸See, your house is left to you desolate (Matthew 23:37-38).

b) Denunciation (11:9)

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.”*

Verse 6 already pronounced judgment by withdrawing God’s pity on the people of the land. In verse 9, we have the same denunciation in more dramatic terms: *I will not be your shepherd*. The LORD’s mercy, compassion, and pity will be withheld from the nation. Even as His people have rejected Him, He has rejected them. In abandoning them to their own fate, the Jews ironically received what they wanted—to be free of Messiah. They desired to be masters of their own fate, captains of their own souls. “By withholding His shepherding, the people are left to the inevitable consequences of their chosen course—and that is always downward (Gen. 6:5-6)” (Mackay, p. 216). But you should be careful what you wish for!

Without God’s leadership and protection, all that awaits the nation of Israel is death, destruction, and devouring: *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*. All of these horrors came to pass in the Jewish war of 66-73 AD. Approximately 1.5 million Jews died in that conflict. The city of Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed. And before the city fell, the starving inhabitants were reduced to cannibalism, all in stark fulfillment of this awful prophecy, the result of rejecting their Messiah and King.

c) Annulment (11:10-11)

¹⁰*And I took my staff Favor, and I broke it, annulling the covenant that I had made with all the peoples. ¹¹So it was annulled on that day, and the sheep traders, who were watching me, knew that it was the word of the LORD.*

To symbolize the withdrawal of His protection from the land of Judea, Zechariah broke the first of his shepherding staffs, the one called *Favor*. This staff was the rod which protected God’s people from external harm by the nations. In verse 10, the breaking of this staff is equated with *annulling the covenant that I had made with all the peoples*. This is not the covenant that God made with His people (singular) Israel. God did not break that covenant, although His people did through their sin and rebellion against the LORD and His Anointed (Jer. 31:32). Rather, this is a metaphorical covenant with “the peoples” (plural) or “the nations” on behalf of Israel. In essence, God had erected a spiritual wall of defense around His people, to restrain the nations and limit their ability to harm or destroy His chosen ones. By rescinding this agreement, God was removing His shield of protection from Israel. They would now become “fair game” or “ready prey” for the nations to exploit.

When God annulled this covenant, it allowed the Romans to destroy Jerusalem, in the same way the Babylonians had done 650 years previously. But the covenant *with all the peoples* held during the days of the Greeks, so that Alexander was powerless to harm Jerusalem, and while Antiochus IV Epiphanes did some damage to God’s people, they were equipped with the

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strength of the LORD, who was their battle bow, and were able to defeat the Seleucids. God is warning His people in this passage that unlike their success against the Greeks, their war against the Romans will be futile, because His favor no longer rests on them, and He has given the nations free reign to impose their cruel will on Jerusalem.

As in verse 7, the Hebrew phrase translated as *sheep traders* in the ESV is rendered differently in most other major English translations: it is the “oppressed” or “poor” or “afflicted of the flock.” It seems best to understand this group as the believing remnant, who heard and believed and received Jesus:

¹¹He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. ¹²But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, ¹³who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God (John 1:11-13).

This true remnant had the words of Jesus and the spiritual insight that comes from the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Thus, at the appropriate time, they remembered the instruction of their Savior, when He said:

²⁰But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. ²¹Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, and let those who are inside the city depart, and let not those who are out in the country enter it, ²²for these are days of vengeance, to fulfill all that is written (Luke 21:20-22; cp. Matthew 24:15-16).

When the Roman general Titus unexpectedly lifted the siege of Jerusalem for a few days, the Jewish Christians recalled the above warning of Christ, and fled for the mountains of the Trans-Jordan, safely escaping to Pella, a city of the Decapolis. In this way, those faithful few who kept their eyes on Jesus, *who were watching me, knew that it was the word of the LORD.*

4. The Betrayal of the Good Shepherd (11:12-14)

a) *Thirty Pieces of Silver (11:12-13)*

¹²Then 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. ¹³Then 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.

Here we have the final rejection of and insult given to the Good Shepherd. Because their relationship has ended, Zechariah, still playing the role of Messiah in this dramatization, asks for his severance pay: *If it seems good to you, give me my wages.* The onus is put on the sheep to pay a fair wage for the loving care with which the shepherd had tended them. They were asked to evaluate the benefit of His labors on their behalf. This was actually a religious test, since the “wages” rightly due to Jesus were “the spiritual fruit of His labors—repentance, faith, true heart piety, humble obedience, and grateful love” (Baron, p. 403). If they could not give Him the whole-hearted allegiance that was His due, then nothing else they could pay would be appropriate: *but if not, keep them.*

So, what worth did they place on the Messiah? It was purely monetary: *And they weighed out as my wages thirty pieces of silver.* Instead of giving the living LORD their respect, homage, and worship that all creatures owes their Creator, they valued Jesus Christ at the price of a dead slave: “If the ox gores a slave, male or female, the owner shall give to their master thirty shekels

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of silver, and the ox shall be stoned” (Exodus 21:32). How insulting! Israel would rather have a dead slave than a living Messiah, and so they condemned Him to death. Zechariah’s appraisal of his payment is full of irony and sarcasm: *the lordly price at which I was priced by them.*

The LORD commands Zechariah to refuse the payment offered to him. Instead he is to *throw it to the potter.* Most commentators agree that the expression “throw it to the potter,” is one of contempt, equivalent to “throw it in an unclean place,” similar to our modern expression “throw it to the dogs.” The potter was the lowest of the craft classes, since their products were easily breakable and cheaply replaced. Thus, in contrast to a silversmith or a blacksmith, the profession of potter was held in relative contempt.

Zechariah records his obedience to God’s word, noting that he *took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them into the house of the LORD, to the potter.* This action was figuratively carried out by Zechariah in his role as the rejected shepherd. Notice that as he tossed the money away to the potter, he was in *the house of the LORD.* This suggests that the potter in question either had a shop in the temple precincts, or he was visiting the house of worship, perhaps on business to deliver pots and vessels to the priests for the services there.

Of course, the prophecy of verses 12 and 13 is famously fulfilled in the betrayal of the Lord Jesus Christ by Judas Iscariot, as recorded in the gospel of Matthew:

³Then 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, ⁴saying, “I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.” They said, “What is that to us? See to it yourself.” ⁵And throwing down the pieces of silver into the temple, he departed, and he went and hanged himself. ⁶But the chief priests, taking the pieces of silver, said, “It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, since it is blood money.” ⁷So they took counsel and bought with them the potter’s field as a burial place for strangers. ⁸Therefore that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day. ⁹Then 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, ¹⁰and they gave them for the potter’s field, as the Lord directed me” (Matthew 27:3-10).

As previously discussed, while the attribution of this prophecy by Matthew to Jeremiah has caused consternation in the past, it can be explained either by: 1) deferring to Jeremiah as the first prophet on the scroll that contained the Twelve, including Zechariah; or 2) a conflation of Zechariah’s prophecy with various texts in Jeremiah which relate to his interactions with the potter (Jer. 18:1ff; 19:1ff) and his action to purchase a field at Anathoth (Jer. 32:6-9).

While the actual events differ slightly from the enacted prophecy of Zechariah, the substance of the prediction—thirty pieces of silver as the price of betrayal, the contemptuous tossing of the blood money down in the temple, and the ultimate disposition of the wages to the potter (in order to buy his field)—are all exactly as foreordained by the LORD. Altogether, this is a most accurate and amazing fulfillment of a prophecy made more than 500 years previously!

b) Second Staff (11:14)

¹⁴*Then I broke my second staff Union, annulling the brotherhood between Judah and Israel.*

The final symbolic action in this drama is the breaking of the second shepherd’s staff, called *Union.* This staff represented the well-being of the whole or united flock. The breaking of this staff is described as *annulling the brotherhood between Judah and Israel.* “The destruction of

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the brotherhood between Judah and Israel is not to be taken literally, for this bond had been broken long before in the time of Rehoboam, but is used as a metaphor of disunion. The breach of the past, with its mournful results, is used as a type of the future” (Moore, p. 263).

The breaking of the first staff, *Favor*, resulted in God withdrawing His protection of Jerusalem against the depredations of the Romans. The snapping of the second staff, *Union*, divided the nation so they could not fight effectively against their foreign invaders, but instead descended into civil strife within their own ranks. Both of these factors played an important role in the disastrous events of 70 AD.

C. The Foolish Shepherd (Zechariah 11:15-17)

1. Command (11:15-16)

¹⁵Then the LORD said to me, “Take once more the equipment of a foolish shepherd. ¹⁶For 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.

Having completed his starring turn as the Good Shepherd in the morality play of verses 4-14, Zechariah is cast against type, this time commanded by God to act as a “foolish” or “worthless” shepherd. “‘Foolish’ does not principally indicate one lacking in intelligence or common sense, but rather points to someone without principles or fear of God. He despises wisdom and discipline (Pr. 1:7)” (Mackay, p. 223). The “equipment” he is to take up is likely a shepherd’s cloak and staffs, although these staffs do not have symbolic names like those of the Good Shepherd.

The purpose for Zechariah’s reenactment of the foolish shepherd is to demonstrate visually that in place of the rejected Messiah, the LORD will raise up a wicked shepherd that the apostate people deserve. Six characteristics of this foolish shepherd are given. 1) He *does not care for those being destroyed*. Unlike the Good Shepherd, who tended the sheep and loved them (11:7), this shepherd only looks after himself, not the perishing sheep of the flock. 2) He does not *seek the young*. These are the sheep who are smaller, weaker, and need more tender care. 3) He does not *heal the maimed*. One of the chief functions of the shepherd was to protect the sheep from harm and to nurse their wounds when they were injured. The foolish shepherd has no concern for those who need physical care. 4) He does not *nourish the healthy*. Taking care of sheep who are well takes almost no effort, but the foolish shepherd cannot even muster the energy to do this minimal task. 5) He *devours the flesh of the fat ones*. Again, the foolish shepherd is only interested in his own gain. 6) His rapaciousness extends to *tearing off even their hoofs*. The picture is of the foolish shepherd going to any lengths to satisfy his personal appetites, even to sucking the marrow out of the hoofs. The laziness, selfishness, cruelty, greed, and lack of compassion of the foolish shepherd stand in stark contrast to the Good Shepherd.

2. Lament (11:17)

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!”

The fate of the foolish or worthless shepherd is taken up in the lament which closes this passage. The indictment of his failure to shepherd the flock results in a withered arm and a blinded eye.

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Metaphorically, this speaks to a removal of strength and intelligence. He should have used the strength of his arms to guide and protect the sheep and the perception of his eyes to determine and meet the needs of the flock. But because he had abandoned his responsibilities, his capabilities will in turn desert him. In summary, this lament describes the judgment that falls upon wicked leaders.

Unlike the straightforward association of the Good Shepherd in verses 4-14 with the Messiah, Jesus Christ, the identification of this *foolish shepherd* has led to great speculation amongst commentators. Some suggest one of the Herods, others suggest all evil rulers generally, and still others point to specific Roman emperors or rulers, or Rome in general. The choice of Rome seems pertinent, given that the Jews, in rejecting Christ, embraced Caesar (Jn. 19:15). They replaced their Good Shepherd with a rapacious ruler who had no allegiance to, concern for, or even interest in the well-being of the Jews. Ultimately the last Caesar, Nero, dispatched Vespasian to Judea on the campaign that resulted in the destruction of the nation in 70 AD. Meanwhile, Nero descended into madness and committed suicide, having lost effective control of the empire he ruled over for his own glory.

Conclusion and Application

Through a dramatic prophecy in which Zechariah shepherds “the flock doomed to slaughter,” we are given a vivid picture of the disastrous consequences of rebellion and sin. *Rejection of the Messiah, the Good Shepherd of Israel, results in devastating judgment and destruction for unbelievers, although He will preserve His remnant.* When the Jews of the New Testament chose Caesar as their king instead of Jesus Christ, they sealed their fate. God removed His pity from Israel and declared He would no longer shepherd them, leaving them instead under the heartless governance of foreign kings. The LORD lifted His protective restraint of the nations against Israel and gave them over to division and internal strife. The inevitable result led to the destruction of the temple and the dissolution of the nation in 70 AD.

However, there is much more to Zechariah chapter 11 than an ancient history lesson. We need to apply the learnings from the past and personalize them in the present. If we truly understand the consequences of rejecting the Messiah, we will throw ourselves upon His mercy and grace for salvation. Phillips explains:

Just as Jesus came to Jerusalem, so He comes to every man and every woman. He offers you salvation—forgiveness by His death for your sins. But He also warns against the consequences of rejecting Him as Savior and Lord. Understand that if you reject Jesus, you will cause more than sorrow and sadness in His loving heart. Understand that you will have rejected God.... The warning, then, is this: If you reject the grace and mercy of God, refusing the Savior He has sent, God must then reject you in turn. If you choose sin and its pleasures, you cannot escape sin’s judgment. Zechariah reluctantly broke the two staffs that represented God’s blessing, and so too will all the godless find themselves without the benefits of God’s grace (Phillips, pp. 252-253).

For next time: Read Zechariah 12:1-9.