

Up to this point Zechariah's messages have been presenting a glorious future. The tone now changes. Chapter eleven of Zechariah is a difficult passage to interpret. There seems to be little consensus in commentaries as to the meaning. I'm going to share what I see in the chapter, but realize it is my opinion only. Like all of Scripture, even if we don't understand the details of exactly what is presented, there are overarching principles that we can glean. This chapter includes verses quoted in the Gospels.

The text starts with a Hebrew poem. ¹ *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!* Zechariah 11:1-3 The cedars and oaks, also called glorious trees, probably represent the leadership of Judah, later in the passage referred to as shepherds. The high priest Joshua whom we saw in earlier chapters must have passed on by the time of this prophecy. The high priest we see in Nehemiah a few decades later appears to be ungodly and even allowed his son to marry the pagan daughter of a leading enemy of Judah (Nehemiah 13:28ⁱ). While the previous chapters promised blessing and prosperity, this chapter brings a prophetic warning that evil rulers can bring disaster upon their people.

The Talmud (a collection of Jewish writings, some of which come from the first century) pointed to this passage and reported that the temple doors nightly opening of themselves from the time Jesus was crucified until the destruction of the temple. *"Our rabbis taught: During the last forty years before the destruction of the Temple the lot [For the Lord] did not come up in the right hand; nor did the crimson-colored strap become white; nor did the western most light shine; and the doors of the Hekel [Temple] would open by themselves"* (Soncino version, Yoma 39b). One rabbi declared that this verse in Zechariah predicted the destruction of the temple. *"Said Rabban Yohanan Ben Zakkai to the Temple, 'O Temple, why do you frighten us? We know that you will end up destroyed. For it has been said, 'Open your doors, O Lebanon, that the fire may devour your cedars' "(Zechariah 11:1)' (Sota 6:3). The beams within the temple were cedars from Lebanon, as well as those in Solomon's palace (1Kings 7:2ⁱⁱ).*

Some commentators connect these first three verses with the previous passage as a conclusion to what is done to the false shepherds (leaders of Israel). These mighty trees, shepherds, and lions all represent the leaders of Israel who use the people for their own gain, distort the truth, and misrepresent God. A final judgment was coming (Isaiah 2:11-13ⁱⁱⁱ). They would be cut down and have no place to hide. In that sense, the rabbi who saw this verse pointing to the destruction of the temple saw that the power base of the leaders was the temple cult that they were misusing. That is consistent with Jesus' declaration that all who came before Him were thieves and robbers and the temple had become a den of thieves (John 10:7-10^{iv}; Matthew 21:13^v).

The High Priest Annas had made the outer court of the temple a market place for sacrificial animals and for the exchange of coins to the only approved coin for the temple tax. Instead of a house of prayer for all nations, it was market place that exploited the people and made the high priest and his family very wealthy. No wonder Jesus took a whip to it two different times (John 2:15-16^{vi} and see above Mt 21:13).

Sadly, this same type of thing happens in churches as well (Acts 20:29^{vii}). There are those who distort the Word of God to fit with the present culture. Then those who desire a faith that is not offensive to the culture add to their numbers and income. The salaries of some of these leaders is obscenely high. But what is worse is the watered down and often distorted gospel message. **People don't know they need a Savior unless they know they are sinners.** If we don't talk of sin and God's just judgment, we will attract a lot of people, but will they see the need to repent?

Who is the real Jesus? There is the Jesus whose sayings are recorded by the men He chose who lived with Him in the Jewish culture and memorized the sayings of their rabbi and recorded those teachings for posterity. There is also a Jesus of the imagination of men. This new Jesus would never condemn anyone. He certainly didn't have to die as a sacrifice in our place for our sins. After all, what is sin? This new Jesus is completely removed from his culture and words of those who lived with him for three years. The prophets of old challenge us by their writings to make a choice between these two. Will we be intellectually honest, or will we believe what we want to believe?

The men Jesus chose to convey His message declared that Jesus said He will be the final judge of every soul (John 5:22^{viii}). He will not allow evil to go unpunished and warned that we must receive the ransom He paid for us and know Him personally to be forgiven and enter heaven (Matthew 20:28^{ix}; 25:41^x; John 3:18^{xi}). The world hates the message of judgment and final justice because the prince of this world hates it. He knows his judgment awaits him. While many talk about Jesus and love, it is not the same Jesus and nor is it the same kind of love that we know. Instead it is an imaginary Jesus who permits anything and forgives everything and a love that exalts self as a good person without dealing with the wickedness in our own hearts (Jeremiah 17:9^{xii}).

The preaching of the cross and man's sin debt will always be offensive to the world (John 15:18-19^{xiii}). God's ways will always contradict man's ways and our justification of sin. Christianity will always be counter-cultural until Jesus comes to reign. Then the cry of verses one through three will resound throughout the earth.

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

Zechariah 11:4 Another prophetic word from the LORD begins here, though it ties in with the previous message. The LORD has Zechariah perform two symbolic acts. His role is in verse 4 is a shepherd over the flock doomed to be slaughtered. He plays the role of the good shepherd who is none other than the LORD God. The explanation of the meaning is in verses 5-6, and the act itself in verses 7-14.

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 neighbor, and each into the hand of his king, and they shall crush the land, and I will deliver none from their hand." Zechariah 11:5-6 The pitiless shepherds were getting rich at the expense of the people. From the ruins of the priests' homes buried in AD 70, we can see this was in fact the case at the time the temple was destroyed. Some "pastors" in our day have out done them amassing a net worth of tens of millions, and in a few cases even more.

The language takes us all the way back to their entire history when Judah and Israel were one. There were a few good leaders, but for the most part they fit the description given here. The leaders and people were going to face a devastating destruction from their enemy. It took place when they went into captivity. And it would take place again at the above-mentioned time when Rome crucified thousands while others starved during the siege of Jerusalem. Verse six tells us that God would abandon them to their own destructive ways toward one another, and that is what happened during the first and second Jewish revolts that led to destruction of the temple and their expulsion from Jerusalem.

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." ¹⁰ And I took my staff Favor, and I broke it, annulling the covenant that I had made with all the peoples. Zechariah 11:7-10 Zechariah symbolically acted out the role of the LORD. He took two staffs and named one Favor and the other Union. He acts out the destruction of three shepherds. We aren't told who they represent, but perhaps it was the last three kings of Judah before the fall of Jerusalem. He acted impatient with the sheep and they with him, despising him. This speaks of the LORD'S desire to see the kings submit to His Spirit and serve the people and for the people to heed His Word and love one another. But they despised the conviction God sent.

He removed himself as shepherd so that the bad shepherds could continue to destroy the flock and the flock destroy one another. He broke the staff called Favor. God had favored His people Israel, but the time of favor would come to an end because of the actions of the leaders and the people. It is a fearful thing to be abandoned by God (Matthew 27:46^{xiv}). Left to our own devices man can commit unspeakable atrocities. During Babylon's long siege on Jerusalem, starvation literally left people eating the flesh of their neighbors. At the conclusion of the first Jewish revolt against Rome thousands were crucified and many died of starvation.

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. Zechariah 11:11 The leaders who were watching Zechariah knew this was their own history. They acknowledged that it was an accurate portrayal of their past but also a warning for the future.

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. 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. Zechariah 11:12-13 This is the end of the first act but also a foreshadow of the betrayal of Jesus the good shepherd (Matthew 26:15^{xv}). Thirty pieces of silver was the price of a slave (Exodus 21:32^{xvi}). Judas was a slave to money and thereby a slave of the false leaders in Jesus' day.

He is told to throw the money to the potter, but the strange thing is that it is thrown into the temple. In the time of the prophecy a potter worked in the temple for the priests, but not in Jesus' day. So how would this fit both times periods? We see in Matthew that the priests took the blood money and bought a field from a potter for a burial place for the poor (Matthew 27:9-10^{xvii}; Acts 1:18-19^{xviii}). What detail!

It is hard to imagine what the people in Zechariah's time understood by this prophecy. The meaning, though, was clear. The leaders had rejected God as their leader, valuing Him no more than a slave. That is what caused the nation to divide. That is why they went into captivity. Unless they accepted God's discipline and repented and treated one another with kindness and justice, they would continue to have shepherds that were a reflection of their own nature (Micah 6:8^{xix}). Eventually the LORD would leave them on their own and they would face the consequences of the lack of His protection. That is exactly what happened when Jesus came. In rejecting Jesus, the chief priests brought on the destruction of the temple and eventual expulsion from Jerusalem.

14 Then I broke my second staff Union, annulling the brotherhood between Judah and Israel. 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!" Zechariah 11:14-17 Israel had long since departed from Judah and been spread abroad by Assyria. The rejection of God leads to the breakdown of unity between people in any group or nation. That is because when God is rejected the pride of man reigns and when pride reigns conflict is inevitable. Only the recognition of the holiness of God can humble us to surrender to Jesus which brings us into unity and selfless love for one another.

Without that humility godless rulers will inevitably rise up to take advantage of the people. This may be speaking of the High Priest Caiaphas who plotted to kill Jesus or the leaders at the time Rome destroyed the temple. God will judge wicked, selfish rulers even though they are what the people deserve.

Some interpreters believe this last verse points to the future coming of the anti-Christ who is the most worthless shepherd of all time. They believe that this verse is a description of his wound and connect it to a passage in Revelation 13. *12 It exercises all*

the authority of the first beast in its presence, and makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose mortal wound was healed. Revelation 13:12 If that is the case, or even if it is a pattern God employs, the world will be deserving of the leader they get. God allows the hardships to turn hearts back to Him. When faced with the consequences of our own anti-god choices, we either harden hearts as many will in that day (Revelation 9:20-21^{xx}), or we humble ourselves and repent and seek His forgiveness (Revelation 11:13^{xxi}).

Some would say that this is a harsh God. I see it is a merciful and gracious God who will allow whatever it takes to turn our hard hearts in the right direction for our eternal good (2 Peter 3:9^{xxii}). As the world increasingly rejects any kind of judgment and refuses to call things wrong even when they destroy us, we can see how easy it will be for a worthless shepherd to tell people what they want to hear to gain power (2 Timothy 4:3-4^{xxiii}). We have many like this today in religious and government offices.

The ultimate worthless shepherd will come when the world is eager to receive him. What is this hatred of law enforcement and public cry for the release of criminals if not the mystery of lawlessness described by the Apostle Paul? *⁷ For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. ⁸ And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming.* 2

Thessalonians 2:7-8 The final worthless shepherd will be called the Lawless One. His campaign slogan will be, "No judgments, no right or wrong, each should do what they think best." There was a period in Israel like that described as "everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25^{xxiv}). The only ones considered to be criminals will be those who have the conviction of right and wrong, especially those who stand for the truth of God's Word.

What are we to do about this trend we see in our own culture? Speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15^{xxv}). Let the real love (*agape*) of Christ flow through you so people can see the difference (2 Corinthians 5:14^{xxvi}). Never be ashamed of the Gospel of Jesus (2 Timothy 1:8^{xxvii}). And always be ready to give an answer for the hope we have in Jesus (1 Peter 3:15^{xxviii}). The darker it gets, the brighter the light of Jesus in us will shine! And remember, where iniquity abounds grace abounds even more (Romans 5:20^{xxix})!

Questions

- 1 How do we know the high priests after Joshua were bad shepherds?
- 2 What do Jewish writing say about Zechariah 11:1?
- 3 Why was the destruction of the temple an end of the bad shepherds?
- 4 What evidence do we have of their greed in Jesus' day?
- 5 Does this happen in churches?
- 6 How is Jesus and love different from the same words in our culture?
- 7 How do we know this reminding them of past patterns?
- 8 How was the betrayal price played out with Judas?
- 9 What happens when any group or nation rejects God?
- 10 How might the last verse point to the anti-Christ?

ⁱ **Nehemiah 13:28 (ESV)**

²⁸ And one of the sons of Jehoiada, the son of Eliashib the high priest, was the son-in-law of Sanballat the Horonite. Therefore I chased him from me.

ⁱⁱ **1 Kings 7:2 (ESV)**

² He built the House of the Forest of Lebanon. Its length was a hundred cubits and its breadth fifty cubits and its height thirty cubits, and it was built on four rows of cedar pillars, with cedar beams on the pillars.

ⁱⁱⁱ **Isaiah 2:11-13 (ESV)**

¹¹ The haughty looks of man shall be brought low, and the lofty pride of men shall be humbled, and the LORD alone will be exalted in that day.

¹² For the LORD of hosts has a day against all that is proud and lofty, against all that is lifted up—and it shall be brought low;

¹³ against all the cedars of Lebanon, lofty and lifted up; and against all the oaks of Bashan;

^{iv} **John 10:7-10 (ESV)**

⁷ So Jesus again said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep.

⁸ All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them.

⁹ I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture.

¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

^v **Matthew 21:13 (ESV)**

¹³ He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you make it a den of robbers."

^{vi} **John 2:15-16 (ESV)**

¹⁵ And making a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and oxen. And he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables.

¹⁶ And he told those who sold the pigeons, "Take these things away; do not make my Father's house a house of trade."

^{vii} **Acts 20:29 (ESV)**

²⁹ I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock;

^{viii} **John 5:22 (ESV)**

²² The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son,

^{ix} **Matthew 20:28 (ESV)**

²⁸ even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

^x **Matthew 25:41 (ESV)**

⁴¹ "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

^{xi} **John 3:18 (ESV)**

¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

^{xii} **Jeremiah 17:9 (ESV)**

⁹ The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?

^{xiii} **John 15:18-19 (ESV)**

¹⁸ "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you.¹⁹ If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.

^{xiv} **Matthew 27:46 (ESV)**

⁴⁶ And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

^{xv} **Matthew 26:15 (ESV)**

¹⁵ and said, "What will you give me if I deliver him over to you?" And they paid him thirty pieces of silver.

^{xvi} **Exodus 21:32 (ESV)**

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.

^{xvii} **Matthew 27:9-10 (ESV)**

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."

^{xviii} **Acts 1:18-19 (ESV)**

¹⁸ (Now this man acquired a field with the reward of his wickedness, and falling headlong he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out.

¹⁹ And it became known to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the field was called in their own language Akeldama, that is, Field of Blood.)

^{xix} **Micah 6:8 (ESV)**

⁸ He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

^{xx} **Revelation 9:20-21 (ESV)**

²⁰ The rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands nor give up worshiping demons and idols of gold and silver and bronze and stone and wood, which cannot see or hear or walk,

²¹ nor did they repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts.

^{xxi} **Revelation 11:13 (ESV)**

¹³ And at that hour there was a great earthquake, and a tenth of the city fell. Seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake, and the rest were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven.

^{xxii} **2 Peter 3:9 (ESV)**

⁹ The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.

^{xxiii} **2 Timothy 4:3-4 (ESV)**

³ For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, ⁴ and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.

^{xxiv} **Judges 21:25 (ESV)**

²⁵ In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

^{xxv} **Ephesians 4:15 (ESV)**

¹⁵ Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,

^{xxvi} **2 Corinthians 5:14 (ESV)**

¹⁴ For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died;

^{xxvii} **2 Timothy 1:8 (ESV)**

⁸ Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God,

^{xxviii} **1 Peter 3:15 (ESV)**

¹⁵ but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect,

^{xxix} **Romans 5:20 (ESV)**

²⁰ Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more,