

Zechariah 11 • The Judgment of the Shepherds

Introduction

Ever notice how so many things once refused entry into the Church which could only be found in cults and fringe false movements eventually find their way into the mainstream of the Church? Jesus not only likened sin to progressing in this manner through the whole “loaf”, but false teaching as well. If not detected and dealt with at the very earliest of stages, the “cure” when enacted much later in the process most certainly is costly, painful, and very difficult. A metaphorical “bad cook” may have introduced the poisonous yeast, but the loaf most certainly will suffer in the course of dealing with it, if it can be dealt with at all. We have seen this same pattern not only with Israel throughout the biblical record, but with the Church during every historic age. God will deal with the false shepherds, but the flock will still have a price to pay in the process.

¹Open your doors, O Lebanon,
That a fire may feed on your cedars.
²Wail, O cypress, for the cedar has
fallen,
Because the glorious trees have been
destroyed;
Wail, O oaks of Bashan,
For the impenetrable forest has come
down.
³There is a sound of the shepherds’
wail,
For their glory is ruined;
There is a sound of the young lions’
roar,
For the pride of the Jordan is ruined.

[Read v.1-3]

Q: How do Lebanon and Bashan relate to Israel geographically?

A: They are on the northern border, basically the gateway for all military incursions from the north, but also the spiritual gateway by which like influences have been introduced.

Q: How do Lebanon and Bashan relate to Israel economically/politically?

A: Lebanon supplied both David and Solomon with materials and support to build both their palaces and Solomon’s Temple, at times being an ally; Bashan was conquered and given to the tribe of Manasseh, but has since been taken by Assyria, Babylon and now Medo-Persia; it was a fertile region especially suitable for raising cattle. Both were prosperous and at one time friendly, both have now turned for the worse.

Q: So what is the meaning of the mention of the trees, as in “cedars” (v.1), “cypress” (v.2) and “oaks” (v.2)?

A: Trees are often biblical metaphors for people. In this case, these strong trees are being poetically connected first to “the shepherds”—that is, those who are supposed to be the spiritual leaders, and “the shepherds” are further connected poetically to “the young lions”.

Q: And what, exactly, is the message for the shepherds?

A: That although they may think they’re as permanent as these mighty trees and ruling in the character of young lions, God’s judgment, represented here as “a fire” (v.1), will ruin their “glory” and “pride” (v.3). He will burn the trees just as they will ultimately burn in hell.

Q: How might this poetic construct betray the reason why God’s judgment is warranted on these shepherds?

A: The illustration of being like these trees, firmly planted in a single place with no mobility is contrary to the very nature of the job of a shepherd to always move and be with the flock; it’s an allusion to the flock coming and serving them rather than being servants who meet the flock’s need. The illustration of being like lions is a parallel allusion to being authoritarian and overbearing rather than the gentle, concerned shepherd of the flock.

Q: But why would God care about shepherds not belonging to ethnic Israel?

A: Their failure, which allowed their own flocks to be spiritually corrupted, has served as the northern gateway to likewise contaminate Israel.

Application: God will deal with the **shepherds** who have not just become **self-serving**, but are responsible for **introducing** the false spiritual influences which have not just corrupted their own **flock**, but the **rest** as well.

⁴Thus says the LORD my God, "Pasture the flock doomed to slaughter. ⁵Those who buy them slay them and go unpunished, and each of those who sell them says, 'Blessed be the Lord, for I have become rich!' And their own shepherds have no pity on them. ⁶For I will no longer have pity on the inhabitants of the land," declares the LORD; "but behold, I will cause the men to fall, each into another's power and into the power of his king; and they will strike the land, and I will not deliver them from their power."

[Read v.4-6]

Q: Is a specific task being given to Zechariah?

A: No. God is stating what is going to be the first step in a series of actions He is going to undertake because of the situation.

Q: Is the same flock being addressed here as in the opening verses?

A: No. From the context beginning here and extending into the following verses, it is apparent that God is now talking about Israel.

Q: What are the main problems with Israel's shepherds?

A: They are supposed to be caretakers working on God's behalf, but instead they act like they are in charge as "Those who buy them slay them and go unpunished" and they "have no pity" on the flock.

Q: How do they compound their egregious behavior?

A: They make the claim that the surreptitious wealth they have made from the flock is a blessing from God. (v.5)

Point: Time and time again we have seen this phenomenon where, in the course of fleecing the flock spiritually, the false teachers enrich themselves at the same time financially. But to hide this fact in plain sight of the flock, they falsely attribute it as coming from God in a twisted justification that what they teach and do is somehow justified. They take God out of their activities while claiming God is behind what they substitute.

Q: What is the consequence of the shepherds' lack of pity?

A: "For **I will no longer have pity** on the inhabitants of the land". (v.6)

Point: A mutual cycle of sin has developed which must be divinely addressed.

"I will dash them against each other, both the fathers and the sons together," declares the LORD. "I will not show pity nor be sorry nor have compassion so as not to destroy them." — Jeremiah 13:14

Q: Why might it be both ironic and appropriate that God delivers them "into another's power and into the power of his king"?

A: Having rejected the One True King, they are given over to experience the earthly authority they have instead pursued.

Application: God will not only deal with the shepherds who have taken **advantage** of His flock, but the flock itself who has **chosen** an unsuitable end by **pursuing** and **following** the false shepherds.

⁷So I pastured the flock doomed to slaughter, hence the afflicted of the flock. And I took for myself two staffs: the one I called Favor and the other I called Union; so I pastured the flock. ⁸Then I annihilated the three shepherds in one month, for my soul was impatient with them, and their soul also was weary of me. ⁹Then I said, "I will not pasture you. What is to die, let it die, and what is to be annihilated, let it be annihilated; and let those who are left eat one another's flesh."

[Read v.7-14]

Q: In whose character is Zechariah now acting?

A: The Messiah, the One True Prophet, Priest and King. The kings of Israel were always endowed with the role of chief shepherd over the people.

Q: Why might a divine illustration involving two staffs be particularly powerful to the people of this time?

A: Previous to their beginning to return to Israel, the Prophet Ezekiel was instructed to make a dramatic presentation with two sticks.

The word of the LORD came again to me saying, "And you, son of man, take for yourself one stick and write on it, 'For Judah and for the sons of Israel, his companions'; then take another stick and write on it, 'For Joseph, the stick of Ephraim and all the house of Israel, his companions.' Then join them for yourself one to another into one stick, that they may become one in your hand. When the sons of your people speak to you saying, 'Will you not declare to us what you mean by these?' say to them, 'Thus says the Lord God, "Behold, I will take the stick of Joseph,

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me realized that it was the word of the LORD. ¹²I said to them, "If it is good in your sight, give me my wages; but if not, never mind!"

So they weighed out thirty shekels of silver as my wages. ¹³Then the LORD said to me, "Throw it to the potter, that magnificent price at which I was valued by them." So I took the thirty shekels of silver and threw them to the potter in the house of the Lord.

¹⁴Then I cut in pieces my second staff Union, to break the brotherhood between Judah and Israel.

which is in the hand of Ephraim, and the tribes of Israel, his companions; and I will put them with it, with the stick of Judah, and make them one stick, and they will be one in My hand." — Ezekiel 37:15-19

Q: Whereas Ezekiel's message pertained to the reunification of both the divided kingdoms of Israel and Judah, what is Zechariah's message?

A: God will remove from Israel His protection from outside forces—that is, "Favor", and His protection from internal forces—that is, "Union", to allow them to suffer the consequences of their actions.

Q: Who are "the three shepherds" who God annihilated in one month?

A: As we have no specific historical record of named individuals, it is more likely that these refer to the three classes of leadership which ruled Israel: the civil government, the priesthood, and the prophets.

*"The **priests** did not say, 'Where is the LORD?'
And those who handle the law did not know Me;
The **rulers** also transgressed against Me,
And the **prophets** prophesied by Baal
And walked after things that did not profit. — Jeremiah 2:8*

Q: So how do we know that these things are actually being prophesied for what will happen to Israel in the course of Christ's First Coming?

A: By the reference in v.12-13 to "the thirty shekels of silver and threw them to the potter in the house of the Lord", which is fulfilled in the actions of Judas and the priests who bribed him. (Mt. 27:3-10; Acts 1:18-19)

Q: What is the wordplay between "give me my wages" (v.12) and "the thirty shekels of silver" (v.13)?

A: In other words, instead of rendering what was due to the Messiah, He was instead betrayed.

Point: *It could be argued the "three shepherds" disposed of were rulers, priests and prophets not only in the spiritual sense of the rise of the Church, but the disposal of Jerusalem, the Temple and the nation in the ensuing wake of Christ's First Coming when the nation was finally cast into the Diaspora.*

Q: So what follows the breaking of the first staff?

A: The second staff "Union", representing Israel internally, is broken, in an illustration of what occurred in the Diaspora. The forces of destruction from the outside are matched by the internal destruction of the bonds within Israel proper.

Application: *In the course of pursuing and following the **false shepherds**, Israel rejects the One True **Shepherd** and suffers the ultimate consequences as a **nation**.*

[Read v.15-17]

Q: What does it usually mean when Scripture employs the term "foolish"?

A: It is always used to describe someone who acts contrary to God's Word and according to the world's wisdom in the pursuit of sin to the point of wickedness.

Q: And how does v.16 describe "a foolish shepherd"?

- "...will not care for the perishing..."
- "...will not...seek the scattered..."
- "...will not...heal the broken..."
- "...will not...sustain the one standing..."
- "...but will devour the flesh of the fat sheep and tear off their hoofs."

¹⁵The LORD said to me, "Take again for yourself the equipment of a foolish shepherd. ¹⁶For behold, I am going to raise up a shepherd in the land who will not care for the perishing, seek the scattered, heal the broken, or sustain the one standing, but will devour the flesh of the fat sheep and tear off their hoofs.

¹⁷"Woe to the worthless shepherd
Who leaves the flock!
A sword will be on his arm
And on his right eye!

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His arm will be totally withered
And his right eye will be blind.”

Point: The “foolish shepherd” neither edifies, exhorts nor consoles by the Word and thereby denies spiritual nourishment so as to “devour the flesh”, but also misleads so that the metaphorical sheep have no hoofs on which to travel.

Q: How have the false shepherds left the flock?

A: Instead of guarding the flock, they have shamefully abused the flock themselves and left them.

Q: So what will God do in return?

A: They will be specified objects of punishment, the arm representing their strength and the right eye representing vigilance.

Observation: The arm being withered and cut off by a sword, and then the eye being blinded and yet also poked with the sword, is a poetic way of stating complete and total divine destruction, that there is no possible remaining function left in either.

Application: When persistently **unresponsive** to God’s warnings and corrections, He inevitably **gives** them completely **over** to that which they will not **cease** to follow.

Overall Application

This is what happened historically to Israel. In the wake of their rejection of Christ their Messiah at His First Coming, they would lose permanent political rule with the destruction of Jerusalem and all religious authority with the destruction of the Temple. In the wake of their permanent removal from the land in the Diaspora to come, authentic Judaism of God’s Word would be replaced by Rabbinic Judaism based on the Talmud. They would substitute the temple for the synagogue, the priesthood for the rabbi, and the system of sacrifices for good works. The three-legged stool of having their own ruler, priests and prophets would all be disposed of. And, of course, instead of paying the Messiah His due wages—that is, the respect and recognition due Him, through Judas they would instead betray Him so as to bring the consequences upon themselves.

Eschatologically, it cannot be overlooked that in the Olivet Discourse, Jesus designated that His first act initiating the Millennial Kingdom will be to judge the nations in a picture of His role as the ultimate Shepherd:

“But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; and He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left. — Matthew 25:31-33

As James points out, shepherds will be held to a higher level of accountability (Ja. 3:1), but as visited in this chapter and the Olivet Discourse, the flock will no less experience His evaluation.