

LESSON 17

Last week we started Chapter 11, and we looked at the first five verses. The first three verses described the overthrow of the Jewish Hasmonean dynasty by Rome in 63 BC. Verses 4-5 described the sorry state of Jewish leadership that led to and followed that event, and those verses introduced a primary theme of the chapter — who will lead the people? Who will be their shepherd? We will see their choice in the verses that follow.

Zechariah 11:6

6 For I will no more pity the inhabitants of the land, saith the LORD: but, lo, I will deliver the men every one into his neighbour's hand, and into the hand of his king: and they shall smite the land, and out of their hand I will not deliver them.

A dramatic change has occurred in verse 6. When Alexander the Great showed up, God camped around the city to protect his people. Here God no longer has pity on the inhabitants of that same land. What has happened?

It is said that people get the leaders they deserve, and that certainly seems to have been the case here. The leaders in verse 6 are being used by God to punish the people that they lead. It is a very frightening thing to realize that God sometimes raises

up bad leaders for the purpose of punishing those being led! That's what we see here.

What has caused this dramatic change? Why are the people of God no longer the people of God? We will find out soon, but there is an important lesson here for us. It is very sad when the *people* of God instead become the *enemies* of God — but that has happened before, and it can happen again.

In a shocking announcement (“Lo!” or “Behold!” in verse 6), God says that he “will deliver the men every one into his neighbour’s hand, and into the hand of his king.” Not only would they be destroyed by their leaders, the people would also be destroyed by internal strife as neighbor turned against neighbor.

Although the focus here is still on Rome, the time frame has shifted *forward* over a century from 63 BC to Rome’s conflict with Jerusalem in AD 70. What began with Pompey in 63 BC ended with Vespasian and Titus in AD 70, and Chapter 11 is describing both the beginning and the end of that process.

Verses 1-3 are focused on the first Roman conflict in 63 BC, while verses 5-6 are focused on the Roman conflict in AD 70. **How do we know that?** Because of the emphasis in verse 6 on *internal strife*. To see why that matters, let’s pause for another brief historical review.

After many years of tension under Roman rule, several crucial events finally led to the outbreak of war between the Romans and the Jews in AD 66. The Roman procurator Florus (the ninth since Pilate) had often angered the Jews by siding with the Greeks in their disputes with the Jews. Florus also took seventeen talents from the temple treasury to pay government expenses. When the people protested, Florus had Roman troops sack part of the city and scourge and crucify the Jewish protesters.

In response to Florus, the Jews stopped their twice-daily sacrifices for the emperor's welfare, which was seen by Rome as an act of rebellion. Those sacrifices had been part of a concession granted to the Jews in lieu of participating in emperor worship.

Florus' activities in Jerusalem gave rise to a several revolutionary movements. One group massacred a Roman garrison in August of AD 66. Later they attacked Herod's palace and massacred the Roman forces there after the Romans had agreed to surrender in exchange for safe passage. Another group captured the Roman fortress of Masada.

By late AD 66, Rome had finally had enough. Cestius Gallus assembled an army of 30,000 soldiers and marched on the province. He took control of Galilee with little resistance and then marched on Jerusalem, eventually making his camp a mile to the north of the city.

Though victory was in his grasp, Cestius for some inexplicable reason abandoned the siege after about a week. (Anytime you see the word "inexplicable" in a history book, you should start looking for the verse in the Bible that explains it!) Withdrawing his forces in retreat, Cestius lost nearly five thousand men and lost valuable military supplies to the Jews. That withdrawal provided a window of escape for those who were looking for the signs from Matthew 24.

During the winter months of AD 66/67, the Jews prepared for Rome's inevitable attack in the spring. The Jews did this by setting up a revolutionary government that divided the territory into six districts, each ruled by a military governor. The historian Josephus was the military governor of Galilee.

In the spring of AD 67, the Roman general Vespasian and his son Titus were sent by the emperor Nero to restore order. They arrived with an army of nearly 60,000 men. Vespasian's first sustained opposition came from a hilltop fortress under Josephus' command. After a seven week siege, that fortress fell in July AD 67. Josephus

surrendered and was taken prisoner. Having subdued the district of Galilee, Vespasian set up garrisons throughout the area during the winter months.

The actual siege of Jerusalem was delayed for nearly two years. First came the news of Nero's death in June AD 68. Since a military command terminated with the death of the emperor who had given it, Vespasian waited for word from the new emperor. But no word came because of the political turmoil that occurred in Rome after Nero's death. Galba was assassinated in January AD 69, Otho was assassinated in April AD 69, and Vitellius was struggling to stay alive himself.

In June of AD 69, still having received no official word, Vespasian resumed military action on his own, only to break it off in July when he was proclaimed emperor by the Roman forces in the east. In the spring of AD 70, Vespasian left for Rome and placed his son Titus in charge of conquering Jerusalem.

The city of Jerusalem eventually fell to the Romans but more as a result of Jewish self-destruction than Roman military power. In fact, Josephus said that "for barbarity and iniquity [the Jews] did no way differ from the Romans." (Remember that the prophecy of *internal strife* in verse 6 is our primary clue at this point that the focus in verse 6 has shifted from 63 BC to AD 70. Other clues will follow.)

Jerusalem was torn by internal power struggles almost from the beginning of the war with Rome. On one hand, the political forces were divided between extremists and moderates, a war party and a peace party. On the other hand, the extremists themselves were divided not only from the moderates but among themselves.

Initially, after the successful rout of Cestius, the moderates had gained control of Jerusalem. By the end of AD 67, however, the war party and the Zealots joined up with other extremists who had moved to Jerusalem after Vespasian's invasion of Galilee. Together they terrorized the moderates and attacked the high priest. Eventually, they seized the temple and replaced the high priest.

The moderates, supported by the public, regained the outer courts and pinned the Zealots inside. Eventually a large outside force entered the city under cover of a severe storm and linked up with the Zealots by retaking the outer courts and killing the moderate leader. The Zealots then went on such a brutal rampage, attacking supporters of the moderates, that the majority of that outside force broke away and returned home. But, by that time, the extremists had already gained control of the city.

The Zealots, however, soon split among themselves. By the spring of AD 69 there were three rival groups in the city, with the third group having been admitted into the city by the remainder of the moderates and by the people, who were weary of the brutality of the Zealots. The third group controlled most of the city. One group of Zealots occupied the outer courts of the temple and part of the lower city of Jerusalem. The other group of Zealots held the inner temple.

During Titus' siege of Jerusalem in the spring of AD 70, the outer court Zealots used the opening of the temple during the Passover to storm the inner courts and force the other Zealots to join them against the third group. Only as Titus was about to breach the walls did the Zealots reluctantly agree to work together with the others in defense of the city.

The Jewish civil war in the city had not only cost many lives, but fires had consumed much of the grain stored in the city while the Romans were camped outside. According to Josephus, the ensuing famine caused 600,000 deaths.

During the Passover of AD 70, Titus moved his troops closer to the city walls and began his assault from the north. In May, he breached Agrippa's wall after nearly two weeks of attack.

Titus prevented provisions from reaching the famine-starved people in the city. Any one who attempted to escape from the city was killed either by the rebels on the inside or by the Romans on the outside.

In July AD 70, Titus broke through the second north wall and moved his forces into position to attack the north and west temple fortifications. He managed to get control of the outer courts on the ninth of August and took the inner courts on the tenth, plundering and desecrating the temple, setting it on fire, and slaughtering thousands.

In September, Titus ordered the burning and sacking of the entire city. Titus had the temple and city walls razed to the ground except for Herod's three towers and a part of the west wall, which he left standing to show the "character and strength" of the city. Since it was too late in the year to sail to Rome, he waited until the spring to return with his spoils from the temple and with nearly 100,000 prisoners to join Vespasian in a triumphal march in Rome in AD 71.

If you travel to Rome today, you can see the Arch of Titus that was constructed in AD 82 by the Emperor Domitian shortly after the death of his older brother Titus. It was built to commemorate Titus' victories, including the Siege of Jerusalem. The south panel of the arch shows the spoils taken from the temple in Jerusalem, including the golden menorah, the gold trumpets, the fire pans for removing the ashes from the altar, and the table of shewbread.

Verses 5 and 6 of Zechariah 11 are describing these events. The people were destroyed by their leaders and by their own internal strife, and it was all a judgment from God. Not only does that fit with the history of AD 70, it fits with Jesus' prophetic description of those events in Matthew 24.

Matthew 24:6-8 — *And ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars: see that ye be not troubled: for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. For nation shall rise*

against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: and there shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes, in divers places. All these are the beginning of sorrows.

According to one source, more people died as a result of the three-way civil war than died at the hands of the Roman army.

Before we move on, let's pause and remember the initial audience for this prophecy. It was not initially directed to a rebellious people, but rather to a faithful remnant who were working to rebuild the temple and the city. Wouldn't we expect them to become discouraged by this message? The city you are rebuilding will be destroyed; the temple you are rebuilding will be destroyed; many of your children will rebel against God, will be judged, and will perish in the war. That is not a happy message! But that is not the entire message. Once again, God will remind them of the wonderful Messiah who was to come. What the people were doing now was vital to God's plan to bless the world, and although their city would not be eternal, the Messiah's eternal kingdom would be.

What is the big question at the end of verse 6? The big question is *why*. Why are the formerly faithful people of God now instead the enemies of God? Why is their city being destroyed? Why is their temple being destroyed? Why are they being killed with God doing nothing to save them? Why? We will find out soon.

Zechariah 11:7

7 And I will feed the flock of slaughter, even you, O poor of the flock. And I took unto me two staves;

the one I called Beauty, and the other I called Bands; and I fed the flock.

One of the many challenges in Zechariah 11 is to follow the personal pronoun “I.” Sometimes God is speaking, and sometimes Zechariah is speaking. In verse 6, for example, God was speaking, but here in verse 7 it seems that Zechariah is speaking. Zechariah was commanded in verse 4 to “feed the flock of the slaughter,” and here in verse 7 Zechariah says that he will do that: “And I will feed the flock of slaughter, even you, O poor of the flock.” Also, in verse 7, Zechariah describes the symbolic actions he is about to perform involving two staves, one named Beauty and one named Bands. What does this all mean?

Let’s start with feeding the flock of the slaughter. As we discussed with verse 4, that command to Zechariah was a message from God that the leaders of the people had failed. They were not feeding the flock, but instead were leading the flock to slaughter. And so God commanded Zechariah to do what the leaders were not doing.

At the beginning of verse 7, Zechariah says that he will do what the Lord has told him to do. But Zechariah restricts his attention to the poor of the flock. The poor of the flock would have been the most abused sheep, abused by both the leaders and by the other sheep. Who are the poor of the flock? The poor of the flock are the faithful remnant. This small group of poor sheep remained faithful to God even when most of the other sheep did not, and God makes symbolic provision for them here through the prophet Zechariah. The message is that there would be a small group who would remain faithful to God and for whom God would continue to provide comfort and protection. How do we know that Zechariah is not feeding the entire flock? Because verse 9 will soon tell us that.

The second half of verse 7 shows Zechariah feeding this small faithful flock, but he does so while holding two staves, one named Beauty and the other named Bands.

A shepherd usually carried both “a rod and a staff” (Psalm 23:4). With the rod he would fend off wild beasts, and with the staff he would guide his flock and rescue the straying sheep. Zechariah has two staves, and the two staves are given symbolic names. The first staff is called “Beauty.” To the rest of the world, the poor of the flock were the *least* beautiful sheep, but to God they were the *most* beautiful. God is calling for the remnant to see themselves as he sees them, and that is something God wants the remnant today to do as well. God’s faithful people are always beautiful in his sight. And what about the so-called beautiful people of this world? What about those people that the world considers beautiful?

Luke 16:15 — *For that which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God.*

In Jesus’ day there was one particular group who thought they were beautiful, and who appeared beautiful to the world, but of whom Jesus had a very different view.

Matthew 23:27 — *Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men’s bones, and of all uncleanness.*

These poor sheep are beautiful to God.

The second staff is called “Bands.” Those bands are the bands holding the people of God together. Once again, we have a reminder that God’s people are a unified people. And we are reminded of the mission of the one true shepherd.

John 10:16 — *And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd.*

God's people are beautiful in the sight of God, and they are unified — one fold led by their one shepherd.

In verse 7, Zechariah is symbolically acting out the role of the good shepherd. We are not told whether Zechariah fed actual sheep in acting out this lesson, but most likely he did, while using the two actual staves.

The command to Zechariah to feed the sheep reminds us of another time when that command was given. Three times in John 21, Jesus commanded Peter to “feed my sheep” or “feed my lambs.”

Jesus is the good shepherd who “giveth his life for the sheep” (John 10:11), and Jesus is the chief shepherd who will appear again to give us a crown of glory that fadeth not away (1 Peter 5:4). But between those two events — his death and his return — Jesus wants leaders who will feed his sheep. Whether those leaders are apostles in the first century or elders in any century, the command is the same: “feed my sheep!”

Again, keep in mind the importance of the word “shepherd” in these chapters of Zechariah. We see the good shepherd, and we see faithful sheep. Jesus talked about these faithful sheep.

John 10:14 — *I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep,
and am known of mine.*

But in the verses that follow we will also see evil shepherds and unfaithful sheep being led astray both those evil shepherds.

Zechariah 11:8

8 Three shepherds also I cut off in one month; and my soul lothed them, and their soul also abhorred me.

Verse 8 is one the most difficult verses in the Bible. Who is speaking here? Most likely, the speaker in verse 8 is once again God, as in verse 6. Zechariah will speak again in verse 9, as he did in verse 7. We seem to be having a back and forth conversation in these verses between God and Zechariah.

Some commentaries say that Zechariah is also speaking here in verse 8. That may be true, but it doesn't really make much difference because even if Zechariah is speaking, he is just relaying the words of God. But it is difficult to see how Zechariah would be symbolically acting out verse 8, so it seems more natural to view verse 8 as a commentary by God on what Zechariah is doing in the other verses.

Who are these three shepherds? Commentaries are all over the place about the meaning and identity of the three shepherds. One commentary rightly noted that the phrase "three shepherds also I cut off in one month" in verse 8 stands as one of the most enigmatic statements in the entirety of the Old Testament.

As with all difficult prophetic verses, let's start by asking about the time frame. These verses are explaining *why* most of God's formerly faithful people had by this time been rejected by God, and why God had used the Romans to destroy their city and their temple in AD 70 as Jesus had foretold in Matthew 24. So whatever we decide about these three shepherds, our explanation needs to make sense in an AD 70 time frame, either because these three shepherds were around in AD 70 or because

something these three shepherds did explains why the destruction in AD 70 occurred.

The second half of verse 8 is an important clue. Whoever these three shepherds were, they were opposed to God, and God was opposed to them. They abhorred God, and God loathed them. We don't usually think of God intensely disliking certain people, but this verse tells us that such can happen. In fact, it was this mutual antagonism that caused these three shepherds to be cut off in one month. This *loathing* reminds us of Revelation 3:16 — “So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.” (But that verse is discussing a different group of people.)

Before we tackle the question of identifying these three shepherds, let's ask two other questions. Is the number *three* being used symbolically here? Is the *one month* symbolic?

When the number three is used as a symbol, it is typically symbolic of God, but it is also sometimes used to denote those who put themselves in the place of God. (We will see a similar symbolic use of the number three in our study of Revelation, with the three-fold repetition of sixes in 666, for example.) The number three may be used to denote religious authorities who thought they were doing the work of God but who were in fact opposed to God. That may be the case here, but we should, at least for now, leave open the possibility that three is instead being used literally in verse 8.

What about the one month? I think that is almost certainly being used here as a symbol, or more accurately as a figure of speech or an idiom meaning a short period of time. These three shepherds would be cut off *quickly*.

And as for the three shepherds, we know what a shepherd represents. Shepherds are used in this text to denote leaders.

So, if that is all correct, then we are looking for three leaders (either a literal three leaders or perhaps any number of *religious* leaders) who were cut off in a way that explains the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.

I think there are two leading candidates for those three shepherds — keeping in mind that the intention behind these verses is to explain *why* the judgment of AD 70 occurred. The first possibility is that these three shepherds represent the religious leaders who worked together to discredit and ultimately kill the good shepherd during his earthly ministry. Those leaders include the scribes, the Pharisees, the Chief Priests, and possibly also the Herodians. The Pharisees and the Herodians sought to destroy Jesus in Mark 3:6. The scribes and the Pharisees sought to accuse Jesus in Luke 11:53-54. The chief priests were instrumental in Jesus' betrayal in Matthew 26:14-15 and crucifixion in John 19:15. And we could go on and on with additional verses.

If three is literal, then the most likely candidates are the scribes, the Pharisees, and the chief priests. If the three shepherds are symbolic for religious leaders, then the Herodians could also be included, although it is not clear that they were religious leaders. If we exclude the Herodians, then three in this case could be *both* literal and symbolic.

But that opposition to Jesus occurred long before AD 70, right? Yes, but there is a direct connection between that opposition around AD 30 and the judgment that occurred forty years later in AD 70. It was the rejection of Christ by those religious leaders that led to the judgment of AD 70.

What we see in this chapter are *three* crucial time periods. First, in the opening verses, we see the time frame of 63 BC when Rome first marched on Palestine. But we also see the time frame of AD 70 when Rome destroyed Jerusalem, and we see the time frame of the earthly ministry and death of Christ. Those three time periods are all connected, and this chapter explains *how* they are connected.

Another possibility is that these three shepherds represent not Jewish leaders but *Roman* leaders. If so, who would they be? That answer is easy. After Nero died, and just before Vespasian became emperor, leaving his son Titus behind to destroy Jerusalem, three emperors came and went in a matter of months. AD 69 has been called the year of four emperors: Galba, Otho, Vitellius, and finally Vespasian (who managed to live into the next year, and in fact reigned for about ten years). These three “cut off” shepherds may be Galba, Otho, and Vitellius — and if so, this is a particularly remarkable prophecy, having been given six hundred years before those emperors briefly came to power. We saw these same three emperors in Daniel 7:8, and we discussed them there as well.

So which is the better view? A point in favor of the religious leaders is that the next verse also mentions those who were “cut off,” and the next verse seems to be focused on those in Jerusalem who were experiencing its destruction. That would not apply to those three Roman emperors.

Another point in favor of the religious leaders is that verse 8 describes the antagonism between the three cut off shepherds and the good shepherd. That was certainly true of the religious leaders, but much harder to see with the three short-lived emperors of AD 69.

Yet another point in favor of the religious leaders being the three shepherds is that the purpose of these verses is to explain why Jerusalem was destroyed in AD 70. Again, that fits well with the religious leaders, but it is harder to see with those particular Roman emperors.

A point in favor of the Roman emperors is that later in this chapter we will see the title “shepherd” being used to describe another Roman emperor. Another point in their favor is that they were certainly cut off in a short period of time — they all reigned and died within a single year.

So which answer do I think is better? If this verse were lifted out of its context, I would lean toward the three Roman emperors who reigned between Nero and Vespasian. Why? Because it would tie in nicely with Daniel 7:8. But when viewed in context, I think the better view is that these three shepherds are the religious leaders who rejected Christ.

But how were those religious leaders cut off in one month? Listen as Jesus answers that question in a parable that is a divine commentary on what we are reading here in Zechariah 11.

Matthew 21:33-45 — *Hear another parable: There was a certain householder, which planted a vineyard, and hedged it round about, and digged a winepress in it, and built a tower, and let it out to husbandmen, and went into a far country: And when the time of the fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the husbandmen, that they might receive the fruits of it. And the husbandmen took his servants, and beat one, and killed another, and stoned another. Again, he sent other servants more than the first: and they did unto them likewise. But last of all he sent unto them his son, saying, They will reverence my son. But when the husbandmen saw the son, they said among themselves, This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and let us seize on his inheritance. And they caught him, and cast him out of the vineyard, and slew him. When the lord therefore of the vineyard cometh, what will he do unto those husbandmen? They say unto him, He will miserably destroy those wicked men, and will let out his vineyard unto other husbandmen, which shall render him the fruits in their seasons. Jesus saith unto them, Did ye never read in the scriptures, The stone which the builders*

rejected, the same is become the head of the corner: this is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes? Therefore say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof. And whosoever shall fall on this stone shall be broken: but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder. And when the chief priests and Pharisees had heard his parables, they perceived that he spake of them.

The religious leaders of Jesus' day were cut off when they rejected their long promised Messiah — when “they caught him, and cast him out of the vineyard, and slew him.” And that happened quickly, just as verse 8 says. That cutting off took only as long as it takes for a stone to drop on someone and grind him into powder! That stone which the builders rejected is the good shepherd, and those “builders” who rejected Christ are, I believe, the religious leaders of verse 8.

Zechariah 11:9

9 Then said I, I will not feed you: that that dieth, let it die; and that that is to be cut off, let it be cut off; and let the rest eat every one the flesh of another.

Zechariah is speaking again in verse 9, and he has a very tough message for someone. But who is it? To whom is verse 9 addressed?

Verse 9 is addressed to the sheep that are not the poor sheep. The poor sheep were fed in verse 7, but the sheep here in verse 9 are not being fed. And the poor sheep

will be comforted later in verse 11, but these sheep in verse 9 are not being comforted. So who do these sheep in verse 9 represent? If the poor sheep represent the faithful remnant, then these other sheep represent everyone else. These sheep are those who rejected Christ and who failed to believe in him and obey him.

Verse 9 is a very sad verse. Zechariah is telling us that God will not feed this group of sheep but will instead leave them to their fate — either to die, to be cut off, or to eat one another's flesh. What does it mean to be cut off? Paul answers that question in Romans 11.

Romans 11:19-22 — *Thou wilt say then, The branches were broken off, that I might be grafted in. Well; because of unbelief they were broken off, and thou standest by faith. Be not highminded, but fear: For if God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest he also spare not thee. Behold therefore the goodness and severity of God: on them which fell, severity; but toward thee, goodness, if thou continue in his goodness: otherwise thou also shalt be cut off.*

The natural branches were the Jews, and those who were not faithful to Christ were pruned from the tree; they were cut off. That cutting off is a spiritual action by God, but the activities did not end there. Those who died refers to those who died during the siege of Jerusalem. And as for eating one another's flesh, Josephus tells us that cannibalism literally occurred during the siege of Jerusalem leading up to its destruction in AD 70.

In leaving them to their fate, God was leaving them to experience both spiritual death and physical death. Again, as I said, this is a very sad verse. These people were once the faithful people of God, but now they have been cut off and rejected by God. And how does the good shepherd feel about that?

Matthew 23:37-38 — *O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate.*

“How often would I have gathered thy children together ... and ye would not!”
Another very sad verse.