

The God Shepherd

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[0 : 00] Now, we're going to read Zechariah chapter 11 this morning. Zechariah chapter 11 verses 4 to 17. I think there was a slight mix-up, some of you who are sharp-eyed, and it's only my fault.

But I think verses 1 to 3 of chapter 11 really go with last week's passage. It's more about how God is describing how he is going to give his people a promised land by driving out their enemies.

So he's going to take Lebanon, he's going to take Bashan, etc. That's verses 1 to 3. This morning, we're really going to be focusing on verses 4 to 17. Let me read that for us.

Thus said the Lord my God, become shepherd of the flock doomed to slaughter. Those who buy them slaughter them and go unpunished. And those who sell them say, Bless be the Lord, I have become rich!

And their own shepherds have no pity on them. 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.

[1 : 14] And I will deliver none from their hand. So I became 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 one month, I destroyed the three shepherds. But I became impatient with them, and they also detested me.

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.

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

And 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. Then the Lord said to me, Throw it to the potter, the lordly price at which I was priced by them.

[2 : 21] So I took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them into the house of the Lord to the potter. Then I broke my second staff, Union, annulling the brotherhood between Judah and Israel.

Then the Lord said to me, Take once more the equipment of a foolish shepherd. 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 hooves.

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.

So while I was away, I'm hoping that you were here to listen to Lockie preach last week on Zechariah chapter 10. And the theme was leadership. I was listening to the recording this week.

The problem, as Lockie put it, was given in verse 2. Chapter 10, verse 2, do you remember? Instead of listening to and trusting the true and living God, the people have been listening to idols and false prophets.

[3 : 38] Verse 2, who utter nonsense. And the diviners see lies. They tell false dreams and give empty consolation. Therefore the people wander like sheep.

They are afflicted for lack of a shepherd. So the theme of these chapters is leadership. It's very important, isn't it, that we choose our leaders wisely. It's important that we choose who we listen to. So who are you listening to in your life at the moment? I understand this is quite pointed because you're listening to me. Hopefully that was a good choice. But even more generally, do you listen to podcasts, politicians, or preachers?

And where are they leading you? Perhaps you find yourself listening to angry men and getting more and more angry yourself.

There is certainly a lot of anger in the world at the moment. Perhaps you find yourself listening to anxious people or despondent people and you've started to become more and more miserable yourself.

[4 : 47] I listen to the news, unfortunately. And wonder if it keeps making me more and more anxious about things far away from me that I can't change at all. Perhaps you find yourself listening to inspiring, motivating people that make you feel really good.

But often those people use flattery, vagaries, false promises and tricks, don't they? To get us excited. We need to remember, I'm sure you already know, that fine-sounding arguments are not always the right ones, are they?

Or helpful to listen to. The Apostle Paul reminds Timothy that in these last days, people, many people, will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.

So people will want to listen to preaching. Preachers never need to be worried about an audience. But Timothy is warned that people will want to listen, by and large, to false teachers, lying preachers.

We are by nature listeners and followers, like sheep. That's how God made us. It's right and good. But we don't always listen and follow the right people, do we?

[6 : 12] A happy sheep needs a good shepherd who is wise and gentle yet strong, who can protect them and provide for them, and who really cares for them.

If we choose our leaders properly, we can expect great joy, even if we have to go through hard times to get there. If we choose our leaders poorly, what else can we hope for but ultimate frustration and sorrow?

So that's what these chapters in Zechariah are all about. What kind of leader are you following? What kind of shepherd do you want to guide you and protect you?

Will you submit yourself ultimately to the good shepherd, our Lord Jesus Christ? So if you've got an outline in front of you, you'll see that there are two halves to the passage.

Unequal halves, I should say. There are two sections, but the first one's a lot longer than the second one. But the passage divides into two sign acts about two different shepherds that once again present for us two ways to live.

[7 : 24] The choice we all face. I know that's tried and true. I hope it's not familiar, that you're too familiar that it's bred contempt. It's wonderful to be reminded that there's a binary choice in the world.

There are two kinds of people. There are two ways to live. And in this passage, the choice, the thing that separates all humanity is the choice between two shepherds.

Do we want the good shepherd of verses 4 to 14 or the worthless shepherd of verses 15 to 17? So the choice is yours.

First of all, the good shepherd in verses 4 to 14. God commands Zechariah to perform a sign act. Now, do you remember these? If you've been here throughout the whole series in Zechariah, maybe you remember back in chapter 6, Zechariah was told to place a royal crown on the high priest Joshua.

And so we talked about sign acts then. They're quite common in the Bible where the prophets are commanded to perform some kind of dramatic parable or illustration to demonstrate their message.

[8 : 34] So here, again, the Lord has another sign act for Zechariah to perform. And in this particular case, it is a historical reenactment. A historical reenactment.

We get the script, if you like, in verses 4 to 6 and then the performance in verses 7 to 13. And it all relates to the past. It's kind of like if you've ever been to one of those medieval fairs.

Has anyone visited one of these things? I grew up doing this every weekend. Because we lived in England. My father loves history. We were always visiting a town or a castle.

I wanted to stay at home and play Nintendo. But we were visiting and you'd meet someone who was dressed up as a fair maiden or, you know, Robin Hood or something like that.

And you'd meet them and they'd enact it and they'd show you everything. Maybe you'd been to a gold rush town or something like that. Everything's sort of set up the way that it used to be.

Everyone, you know, and you meet someone who's playing the part of a miner or a barmaid or whatever.

[9 : 36] So the Lord wants Zechariah to dress up. That's what's happening in this passage. And he wants Zechariah to dress up and take the people back in time on a journey before the exile to give them a sort of parable of how that all unfolded.

How the exile ended up happening. What went wrong for Israel that led to their ultimate demise? So the main character, kind of obviously, is going to be God himself.

Zechariah is to dress up as a shepherd which is to say that he is playing the part of God, the shepherd of Israel. And from now on, what Zechariah does is really about telling us what God did or how God was treated.

You'll notice from the very beginning in verse 4, we are told that the flock is doomed to the slaughter. And the word for slaughter there appears again in verse 7 which is striking because it only appears elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible in the book of Jeremiah.

And when Jeremiah uses it, he is always talking about the destruction of Jerusalem caused by their idolatrous practices that corrupted the Lord's temple.

[10 : 53] So this is a very kind of peculiar, special, and ominous word for Zechariah to use. It reiterates the seriousness of this warning that we're about to receive and it tells us where this whole parable is going.

That God is the shepherd of Israel but his flock, the Israelites, are doomed to be slaughtered. The other characters in this little drama are the shepherds slash sheep traders, the kind of under-shepherds of Israel, the leaders of Israel, who are supposed to be shepherds but then get called sheep traders instead.

In verse 5, they are the ones buying the sheep and slaughtering them and selling the sheep and profiting from their destruction. They say, blessed be the Lord, I have become rich.

So I think these are the leaders of Israel on the one hand selling their own people to the leaders of the other nations who are then slaughtering them. The shepherds of Israel were meant to be caring for the people but they were actually more like sheep traders using them for their own gain.

Now in verse 6, God gives a little explanation of what the Sine Act is all about. He says, For I will no longer have pity on the inhabitants of this land, declares the Lord.

[12 : 19] 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. So here's why the flock is doomed to be slaughtered then, isn't it?

It's because standing behind the pitiless shepherds or sheep traders is actually a pitiless God. A God who is tired, if you like, fed up with the inhabitants of the land.

It's not that God is quick to fly off the handle or easily angered, not at all. And of course, he doesn't actually grow weary but there is an exasperated tone in this verse.

God has shown patience to his people for too long, time and again and eventually his patience must run out for the sake of justice. And so God is not going to protect his people any longer, instead he's going to hand them over to the nations and the kings around them who are going to slaughter them. So that's kind of the script. That's the prologue to the performance. Now we get the performance begins in verse 7.

[13 : 38] Zechariah tells us he obeyed the Lord. So I became the shepherd of the flock doomed to be slaughtered by the sheep traders. And I took two staves. One I named favor, the other I named union and I tended the sheep.

So the parable here begins with this sort of initial idyllic situation. God had a plan to rule over his flock and he intended to use two wonderfully named staves to take care of them.

One staff is named favor, means kindness or pleasantness, it's a lovely word. And then one staff was named union or it can mean harmony. It's a delightful image of a good shepherd.

God has a plan to love and care for his sheep with gentleness and kindness and patience. But then in verse 8 things turn very ugly very quickly.

Zechariah says in one month I destroyed the three shepherds but I became impatient with them and they also detested me. Now this is a tricky verse which maybe goes without saying because almost every verse in this passage is a tricky verse but who are these shepherds and when and why did God destroy them?

[14 : 59] I think the time frame of one month is probably the most helpful thing to notice and to use as a key because again it points us to the fact that this is a historical reenactment that Zechariah is doing and there was a specific month in 586 BC Jeremiah chapter 52 tells us all the details here and gives us very specific dates a specific month back in 586 BC that was particularly devastating for the people of Jerusalem again if you've been here for the whole series you might remember Roy talked about this a few weeks ago it was the fifth month so by the time of Zechariah the people of Israel had been fasting every year in the fifth month commemorating that particularly horrific and horrible month in 586 BC they'd been doing that for 70 years commemorating that particularly horrendous month in that month all the king's sons and officials were put to death the temple and the king's palace was burned to the ground and all the priests were exiled or killed so I think what Zechariah was talking about here is that this is what

God is commanding him to reenact he wants Zechariah to act out that horrific month when the Lord cut down the city of Jerusalem and all its leadership I think that the three shepherds mentioned in verse 8 are probably not three specific men who died in that period some people have tried to connect it to different candidates but there are so many candidates it's quite tricky I think it's more likely to be the three important officers that stood at the heart of the nations the prophets the priests and the kings again this is a very Jeremiah kind of thing to do Jeremiah often mentions these three officers together for instance in Jeremiah chapter 2 verse 26 or Jeremiah chapter 4 verse 9 we won't go there now but feel free to look them up later Jeremiah 2 26 and 4 verse 9 he talks about prophets priests and kings all together and God destroyed them in one month but then the devastating thing about the end of verse 8 is that having dispensed with the three bad shepherds ruling over

Israel God didn't want to shepherd the people himself either so he says but I became impatient with them that is with the sheep and they also detested me so I said I will not be your shepherd what is to die let it die what is to be destroyed let it be destroyed and let those who are left devour the flesh of one another now again this disgusting image echoes language in Jeremiah and the conditions in Jerusalem at the end of Nebuchadnezzar's siege where people were literally eating each other in Jeremiah chapter 15 Jeremiah writes have I got this on the screen actually yeah then the Lord said to me though Moses and Samuel stood before me yet my heart would not turn toward this people send them out of my sight and let them go and when they ask you where shall we go you shall say to them thus says the Lord those who are for pestilence to pestilence and those who are for the sword to the sword those who are for famine to famine and those who are for captivity to captivity and I don't care and Zechariah adds three more horrifying images 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 and then finally in verse 10

Zechariah uses his props I took my staff favor and I broke it annulling the covenant that I made with all the peoples so it was annulled on that day God is no longer going to show favor to his people because they have broken the covenant too often and too heinously it's not that God is breaking the covenant here it's that they have broken the covenant and now he is declaring it null and void formally dissolved again all of this is what happened back in 586 BC 70 years before now Zechariah is reenacting it God handed his people over to his enemies in a single month the leaders were all destroyed and the people were given up for slaughter the covenant God established with his people at Sinai was ripped up because they broke the covenant now at the end of verse 11 when Zechariah does all this we're told that the sheep traders were all watching his performance and they knew that it was the word of the Lord now I think this might sound a bit confusing but I think we're supposed to have two groups of people here in mind aren't we number one probably a literal bunch of sheep traders Zechariah Zechariah is presumably acting out this whole thing with sheep and with real sheep traders that he's dealing with but of course the more important point is that the sheep traders are representatives of the wicked leaders of Israel so perhaps they were there too or somehow the performance has got back to them they saw Zechariah's reenactment of that terrible month seven years earlier when God annulled his covenant with his people and so this parable was a challenge to them what are they going to do about it they knew it was the word of the Lord are they going to heed the warning learn the lessons of the past but in verse 12 the sign!

[21 : 21] act is!! Zechariah turns to the sheep traders 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 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 the point here is that God has decided to quit as the shepherd of Israel since the people don't want him anyway he's sick of them again think of the covenant kind of like a contract here it's like a contract that has now been torn up and God is asking for his wages and he will be on his way how much do they feel that he is owed for his work and they weigh out 30 pieces of silver which we're told is a lordly price or a splendid price one of the questions people have here is whether 30 pieces of silver really is a splendid price is this a large impressive sum of money or is it really a small sum and some people take the comment to be a sarcastic comment that lordly price

I'm not absolutely sure I'm a bit nervous always to overturn the plain meaning of the word of a word in the name of a particular tone like a sarcastic tone that we obviously can't actually see in the text and there really is no indication in the text that we should take this in a sarcastic way so I'm a bit nervous about that to begin with but I think as I've just been reflecting on it I think I want to have my cake and eat it too I think humanly speaking probably it was a large sum of money and therefore the idea is that this is how much the shepherds are willing to pay to get rid of God you know if you've got an annoying employee and you want to get rid of that employee I didn't know rid of him at all but anyway other places workplaces

I hear about this kind of thing if you have an annoying employee you might give them you know just pay them out give them a fat redundancy package so that they never bother you again don't come back I think that is what's happening here in Isaiah and Jeremiah the potter is invariably God in Jeremiah 18 for instance God says to his people O house of Israel can I not do with you as this potter has done declares the Lord behold like the clay in the potter's hand so are you in my hand O house of Israel so it seems to me that again Zechariah is throwing the payment into the temple to God as it were to the potter saying this is the money that they're willing to pay you they think to themselves on the other hand though it is a pathetic sum it must be a pathetic sum when you really think about it right at the end of the old covenant 30 pieces of silver for generations and generations of

God's provision and protection God has specially shepherded these people rescued them out of Egypt led them through the wilderness protected them from their enemies in the promised land there is no amount of money on earth that could ever possibly be enough and that's the price they paid and he says I broke my second staff union annulling the brotherhood between Judah and Israel so in other words now that Israel's covenant with God is over the hopes of them ever being a unified nation again are over too and that of a foolish shepherd 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 hooves so the idea is after the people rejected God as their shepherd and God annulled his covenant with them after that along came or will come a foolish shepherd who will hurt them and exploit them and devour them and again the big question everyone wants to know is who is the Lord referring to who could this shepherd be once again I don't know the answer which I'd love to tell you but there are quite a few candidates and it's hard to know is Zachariah talking about someone in the past again in the present or in the future again there are candidates across the ages I wonder though if in the end as usual

[27 : 09] God's word is kind of left ambiguous for us because it makes the point even clearer the point is that whenever people refuse to have God as their shepherd inevitably someone comes along in God's judgment they end up suffering under the foolish and vicious hands of other shepherds notice in verse 17 the glimmer of hope whoever this wicked shepherd is who God's people had to suffer under for a while in verse 17 God pronounces a word of judgment against him and this gives the people a glimmer of hope 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 I mean you might think that after God has annulled the covenant with his people after the exile after even more rejection that there was no way back for

Israel how could there be God had no contractual obligation as it were to come back as their shepherd to protect them and yet this verse represents hope doesn't it the hope that after such a long and painful story God is still watching over his people and is prepared to punish those who mistreat them in fact as those who live this side of the Lord Jesus and his cross we know that that day has already come and gone you remember in John chapter 10 Jesus talked to the leaders of his day about those who desert the flock the bad shepherds that the Pharisees and others were and

he came to do something about it and the cross was where God's enemies were maimed and blinded and our great oppressors the world the flesh and the devil were conquered and curtailed even if not yet utterly destroyed so that brings us almost to the end of our! together this morning but I just want to close by thinking a little bit more of course probably expectedly about the 30 pieces of silver we just missed it in our reading from Matthew's gospel so you might want to turn over to Matthew chapter 26 and 27 in Matthew 26 we read that Judas agreed to betray Jesus for 30 pieces of silver then in chapter 27 after Jesus is handed over to Pilate Matthew writes in verse 3 chapter 27 verse 3 then when Judas his betrayer saw that Jesus was condemned he changed his mind and brought back the 30 pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders saying I have sinned by betraying innocent blood they said what is that to us see to it yourself and throwing down the pieces of silver into the temple he departed and he went and

hanged! himself but the chief priest taking the pieces of silver said it is not lawful to put them into the treasury since there's blood money so they took counsel and bought with them the potter's field as a burial place for strangers therefore that field has been called the field of blood to this day then was fulfilled what had been spoken by the prophet Jeremiah saying and they took the 30 pieces of silver the price of him on whom a price had been set by some of the sons of Israel and they gave them for the potter's field as the Lord directed me now the first thing to say here is that it's not unusual in the Bible to have composite quotes where one prophet is mentioned but two or more prophets are quoted in fact Matthew is doing to Zachariah what Zachariah did to all the prophets before him so Zachariah keeps mashing up Jeremiah and Isaiah and Ezekiel and these other prophets and making his own construction out of them and what Matthew tends to do is he does the same with Zachariah and with Jeremiah and with the prophets that went before him partly I think to show us that it's not just one prophet it's all the prophets all at once are being fulfilled on this one occasion in this one generation by this one man so don't be put off by the fact that Matthew mentions Jeremiah he knows he's quoting from Zachariah as well and both backgrounds are important the main point is that just like in Zachariah's parable the leaders of Israel once again have become corrupt and they thought that they could get rid of God for 30 pieces of silver again a spectacularly high and yet pathetically low amount of money all at the same time it seems to me obviously it's a high enough price that it tempted

[32 : 48] Judas it's obviously a high enough price to buy a field although I'm not exactly sure how much fields were going for in those days but it was a pathetic price in the end wasn't it to betray God himself for 30 pieces of silver it hints again at what Zachariah did 500 years earlier when Judas throws the money back into the temple and the corrupt leaders paying their part sort of promptly bought a potter's field so what are we to understand from all of this well it's that at the cross the good shepherd the god shepherd was rejected by his people his ancient people the people of Israel for the last time see that is what the 30 pieces of silver that symbolizes god's people and their leaders have become so corrupt they don't want to be

Yahweh's people anymore so they're trying to pay their way out of the covenant to tear up the contract and obviously what Zechariah was doing was just a shadow a foretaste of this this is where the contract really was torn up finally the old covenant was put to an end and the new covenant was established when they crucified the good shepherd the god shepherd now this is a warning to us because the same thing is true for all those who reject god as their shepherd there only remains the worthless shepherds of this world the world the flesh and the devil who will oppress us and the punishment that awaits for us is far worse than exile or even the cannibalism described in Jeremiah if you can think of something so ugly the exile was just a shadow of death and hell so it's a sobering passage

I won this morning isn't it last week's passage I hope was a great encouragement to you was it it's about the joy of having God as your shepherd some of us have been following the Lord for many years isn't it good to follow him wherever he leads to trust and obey what a privilege we have been gathered in whistled in do you remember last week whistled in into God's flock from all the nations redeemed and strengthened and filled with gladness like a heart merry! with wine but this week's passage in that context this week's passage is a warning to choose that joy wisely to choose the shepherd who can bring us that joy don't choose the worthless shepherds who will lead us down into suffering and death the false gods the idols and the false prophets of this age those that say sweet things but empty consolations empty consolations shallow pretentious

treasures instead let us trust God and our good shepherd Jesus following his word wherever he leads us as Moses would say choose life not death even when it's tough if you've been walking with Jesus for many years and you have been wondering perhaps you've started to wonder if there are green pastures really coming at all because you've been wandering through the wilderness for so long what kind of a good shepherd would make us sacrifice so much would put us through so much pain and hardship is it all going to be worth trusting and obeying him at the end well of course it is just keep following him a little longer he is always with us he knows what we're going through and he has been through

God is good God is good and what reward will heaven bring everlasting life with him but there is another side to the coin one 17th century preacher who I don't really like at all but so I won't name him but he has a good quote he puts it like this God threatens terrible things if we will not be happy isn't that a good striking way of putting it God threatens terrible things if we will not be happy it's a very serious choice to choose joy to choose happiness the only way to find happiness and joy is to choose the right shepherd to listen well to our good shepherd as always I do hope that there are people here who are not yet followers of

[38 : 10] Jesus now that might sound like a strange way of putting it I'm not glad that you're not yet following Jesus but I am glad that you're here you're in the right place and you're really very welcome I do hope you'll think really carefully about these things it's a very difficult passage at one level there are lots of complicated tricky details I'm not sure if I got them all right but the big picture is really crystal clear and it's the same thing we hear across the scriptures in every passage there are always and only two ways to live a choice between two shepherds one who will lead us to sorrow and pain and one who will lead us to joy and happiness and everlasting life if we resist God's loving rule over our lives whether in big ways like that ultimate decision of whether I'll follow Jesus or not or in little ways like every day as a Christian you have to choose to listen to Jesus words and follow him or just follow your own passions and follow your own way and listen to other people and their nice platitudes and empty offerings we will if we choose that way we will only find oppression sadness and sorrow and ultimately judgment and wrath whereas the joy of following

Jesus beckons each of us this morning again come and listen to his word trust him with your whole life and you will find rest for your souls let's pray almighty god we thank you for this word this morning we thank you for Zachariah's historical reenactment and that we still have the scriptures that remind us of all these great things that you have done in the past and these terrible things that your people have done and and then suffered we pray that you would impress upon us the warning of this passage let us let us not be flippant or casual about it but to stand before you in reverence and awe humble ourselves and listen carefully and think about our own lives how we might be going astray and need to be called back by your word help us to love one another to encourage each other to keep listening to

Jesus carefully and pressing on and we pray that you would shepherd us home to glory and to eternal life that no one here might miss out on all the good things you have promised your people who hold on and persevere and we pray these things in Jesus name Amen