

GOD'S COMPASSION AND THE DANGER OF REJECTING THE SHEPHERD
ZECHARIAH 11:1-6

A few years ago, a photographer accumulated several photos of some of the most [famous places](#) in the world that he had visited. Some of you might have been to some of these places as well — **do you remember them the way he did?**



I suspect you don't recognize those places from the photos — because while he was in those places, he pointed his camera in the wrong direction.

That made for some humorous photos, but there is a danger in looking at the wrong objects and in going the wrong direction. You know that. And the greatest danger is in going away from and rebelling against God's commands and provision and attempting to live life by your own standards — and failing to live under the authority of Christ, the King. That theme dominates Zechariah 11.

While the book of Zechariah finishes victoriously and triumphantly, chapter 11 is recognized as a somber and dark chapter; it is “unusually bleak” in a book of hope, especially given the hope that was just expressed in 10:10-12. Not only that, but it is also a tremendously difficult chapter to understand. Several writers have said that it is one of the most difficult sections in the book, and one commentator said it is the most inscrutable (perplexing) chapter in all the Old Testament. So here we are. In verses 1-6, we find...

THERE ARE TERRIBLE CONSEQUENCES FOR REJECTING THE MESSIAH (SHEPHERD-KING).

In this passage, the prophet **first delivers bad news**, and then tells us why the bad news is coming.

1. The Coming **JUDGMENT** (vv. 1-3)
2. The Good Shepherd and His **REJECTION** (vv. 4-6)
 - ✓ The Good Shepherd (v. 4)
 - ✓ The Rejection of the Good Shepherd (vv. 5-6)

1. The Coming JUDGMENT (vv. 1-3)

- ✓ There is a significant contrast between 10:12 and 11:1.
 - Chapter 10 begins similarly to chapter 11 with a condemnation of false shepherds (10:2-3).
 - But the chapter ends hopefully with the regathering of the people in the land in the MK.
 - And chapter 11 begins as dismally as chapter 10 ends hopefully. It is a massive contrast.
- ✓ What is happening in Zechariah's prophecy? (What is the context of this chapter?)
 - Remember that chapters 9-11 are an oracle (**burden**, 9:1) against the nations.
 - That oracle is primarily condemnation, and this chapter epitomizes that condemnation.
- ✓ In light of the hope of chapter 10, this chapter is a somber reminder for the Israelites not to be complacent. And it is a warning to repent and not return to idolatrous worship (10:2).

• The recipients of the judgment — who is he warning/addressing?

- ✓ He warns three nations/regions — **Lebanon, Bashan** (north of Gilead), and **Jordan**.
- ✓ The movement is from north to south (as an invading nation would typically arrive in Israel). There will be systematic and thorough judgment on the nations and Israel (**flock doomed to slaughter**, 4).
- ✓ The area includes much of the land that was promised to Israel, though never fully possessed, *so the reference is to the land that will be possessed in the MK*.
- ✓ He also is addressing the things that represented the wealth of those regions:
 - **Cedars** were massive trees, up to 120 ft. tall, and perhaps 30-40 ft. in circumference. They live a long time — some alive today were alive in the time of Christ (2000 years old). They were strong, beautiful, and valuable (used for both Solomon's temple and home). They were the preeminent tree of the age.
 - **Cypress...oaks** — the cypress tree was also long-lasting and prized for construction of buildings and furniture (and idols). And as today, the oak then was a symbol of strength (Amos 2:9) and viewed as the most significant of the deciduous trees. In a region that was lush with vegetation (Bashan), the cypress and oak trees were its most valuable resource.
 - Sheep & land (**Shepherds**)...**lions**. The land across the Jordan was so lush that 2½ tribes took that land as their possession when Joshua led the nation into the promised land. It was good for raising sheep. And while **lions** may not have been a valuable resource, they almost always represented royalty, strength, and dominance (e.g., lion of Judah, Gen. 49:9; Rev. 5:5). (Here, their roar is probably in desperation and hunger as the land is emptied of anything to eat...)
- ✓ So the regions represented the nations holding land that will belong ultimately to Israel in MK (and that will be judged prior to the MK).

- ✓ What do these trees, shepherds, and lion represent? It is not unusual for plants/trees/animals to represent both individual leaders (Dan. 4:10ff) and nations (Ezk. 31:3). So here, the Lord warns the leaders of these nations (and ultimately Israel, which will possess the land) of impending judgment.

- **The devastation of the judgment**

- ✓ **Fire may feed on your cedars** denotes that complete destruction of the cedars a profound accomplishment since burning trees to the ground is no easy feat.
 - Recently our family went on vacation in a mountainous area that suffered a forest fire. The devastation was **sobering and sad** — but we were also surprised at what we found: in most areas, only limbs and 1-2 inches of outer bark burned, leaving trees standing. And some trees seemingly were untouched by others that burned. But in that day, at that judgment, the devastation will be total for the strongest of trees (rulers/nations).
 - The devastation is also noted by the cypress and oaks being **destroyed** — the entire forest (which was dense and invulnerable — “I can’t be defeated”) **has come down**.
- ✓ Notice two other important parts of these warnings —
 - Twice Zechariah calls the nations (and Israel) to **wail** — it often is used of howling in pain; it is a word of sorrow and lament. It is a command (warning) to grieve over the coming judgment.
 - And he also says, if the most dominant and powerful **cedar has fallen** (v. 2), then what hope have the others? If the greatest leaders of Lebanon (the north/Assyria, Babylon, etc....) will fall, then so will all who attempt to resist the Lord. He will be relentless and thorough in judgment.
- ✓ The devastation of the judgment is indicated in one more way — **open your doors...** (v. 1)
 - Countries don’t actually have doors — but it is a metaphorical way of referring to their ability to keep out their enemies (we might say, “seal our borders...”). To open the gate means, “put down your defenses and let your enemy come in and devastate you.” It speaks of the hopelessness of the nation(s) to resist the coming judgment. It will come with power and certainty.
 - And they also had to think of **Psalm 24:7** when they heard this — the gates open to let in the King of Glory, who brings grace and mercy to the people. Similarly, here they open and He brings His judgment and wrath. There is no escaping this complete devastation.

- **The time of the judgment** — when did/will this judgment take place?

- ✓ Some have suggested that this is a reference to the judgment that came from the Babylonian captivity (605–586 B.C., now almost 70-80 years previous). That is unlikely because this is warning and prophetic in nature, and ties to the coming Messiah (chs. 12, 14).
- ✓ Many (most) relate this to the judgment of Israel for the rejection of the Messiah at his first coming, and specifically to the subjugation by the Romans of Israel and the destruction of the Temple (70 AD). Jesus’ first advent *is* in view in this section (9:9; 11:12), so that certainly seems reasonable.

- ✓ I am inclined to see fulfillment in the first century, but also something more:
 - While the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the temple in 70 AD, the destruction here is over the whole land — from the north in Lebanon, south to Bashan, and then the Jordan. The land described in vv. 1-3 suggests the totality of the Promised Land where the Messiah will rule. In the Roman occupation, there was not the total devastation represented in this passage.
 - While the language of vv. 1-3 certainly could refer to the devastation from an invading nation (like Rome), the context refers to YHWH fighting (9:5b-6) and YHWH regathering (9:8ff). While Zechariah enacted the role of Shepherd, it is Messiah who is Shepherd and YHWH speaking (11:11).
 - Additionally, these chapters keep pointing to the coming of the Messiah to regather the people in the MK and rule over them (9:10, 13ff; 12:8; 14:1ff). It seems likely that Zechariah is anticipating the Millennial rule of the Messiah. So 70 AD may have been a partial fulfillment that was anticipating yet another even greater judgment to come.
- Verses 1-3 are an intensely sobering warning of coming judgment (a harsh contrast to 10:9-12). It is a reminder of the full righteousness of God, who rightly gives grace to those who trust in Christ and unhesitatingly judges those who reject Him. “Nothing in the world is so disastrous as sin.” [Feinberg] It is disastrous in its consequences now, and ultimately/infinately disastrous when God evaluates and judges.
 - ✓ Zechariah 10 anticipates the rule of the Messiah on His throne which is so hopeful.
 - ✓ This chapter teaches and warns that before He establishes His kingdom, those who oppose Him must (and will be) overcome.
 - ✓ “This messianic reign will bring great joy and satisfaction to the Lord’s people, but only sorrow to his opponents.” [Klein]

2. The Good Shepherd and His REJECTION (vv. 4-6)

Having delineated the devastation in the land, now God speaks and provides a reason for the judgment as well as a picture of His provision for the nation in the Great Shepherd, the Messiah (vv. 4ff).

• The Good Shepherd (v. 4)

- ✓ **YHWH** commands Zechariah to *pasture* (shepherd) *the flock of slaughter*.
- ✓ Zechariah is to perform a role of caring for the people in the way that her political and religious leaders had not done (10:2-3; 11:15-17). He was to direct and protect the people.
- ✓ Here Zechariah “acts out” the role of the shepherd, something not uncommon in the OT — Hosea was called to marry Gomer (Hos. 1-3), Isaiah dressed as a prisoner of war (Is. 20:2-4), Jeremiah smashed pottery and wore shackles to indicate the coming bondage to Babylon (Jer. 19, 27), and Ezekiel carried out numerous different images (Ezk. 4-12). Zechariah is called to do something similar to those other prophets in this passage; he acts like the great, good Shepherd (Jn. 10).

- ✓ His “service” in this role play is given to **the flock** doomed **to slaughter** (“flock of slaughter”).
 - The flock obviously refers to God’s people — His sheep, Israel.
 - To be a flock of **slaughter** means that they are destined for being put to death — but the word does not necessarily mean that every single sheep dies (cf. Esth. 9:5; Ezk. 26:15); even in the slaughter, God always has His remnant that will be saved (Rom. 9:27) and then the nation.
 - They are “for slaughter” because they are deceived by ungodly shepherds (10:2-3; 11:16-17) and because they have been rebellious themselves (1:4), and would continue (Lk. 23:18-21).
 - God has always been the Shepherd of Israel (Ps. 23; 80:1) and Christ came as the great provision of God’s shepherding care (Mic. 5:4). And Israel and the nations have perpetually rejected.
- ✓ Zechariah is an object lesson and type of the Good Shepherd, Jesus. They would reject Him and they would suffer the consequences of that rejection by the Roman occupation and subjugation. They would also persist in that rebellion and would (still will) face cleansing before YHWH initiates MK.

• **The Rejection of the Good Shepherd (vv. 5-6)** — two significant components of these verses:

- ✓ *The ungodly actions of the ungodly shepherds (v. 5).* They rebelled in three ways against God:
 - They **buy them** and **slay them**. The sheep were a provision for the shepherds and even more, the shepherds were given to the sheep to provide care (which is helpful imagery for elders). They should have protected them from danger and given them good land to graze. Instead they killed and devoured them for their own purposes.
 - ... It is difficult to understand all the imagery in this chapter — who are these shepherds? Many say it is all the invading nations that repeatedly took advantage of Israel. Perhaps.
 - ... Given that these shepherds were to care for Israel it seems more likely that it is all the kings and religious leaders of Israel and Judah that failed to fulfill their callings (**their own shepherds** gives the sense that it is Israel’s leaders scheming against Israel).
 - **Those who sell them...“I have become rich!”** — they not only kill instead of protecting, but they act for their own selfish gain — and then have the audacity to say it is provision from **God** (it’s not hard to think about unscrupulous health/wealth preachers who do the same today).
 - **Their own shepherds have no pity on them.**
 - ... Those who should have compassion and pity for the helplessness of the sheep are uncaring. The ones who have been given *for* the sheep instead are careless with the sheep.
 - ... The word **compassion** refers to a compassion that is patient and gentle. In His strength, God had that compassion on the sheep (10:6); in their weakness (when they should have particularly been understanding and merciful), the earthly shepherds did not have **pity**. Instead of being gentle, these shepherds are ruthless. But there is judgment coming...

- ✓ *The righteous judgment by the compassionate God (v. 6).*
 - ***I will no longer have pity*** — the Lord *did* have pity. But there is a limit to it. It stopped here.
 - ... The idea is parallel to **Mt. 6:14-15** — if one is rebellious against God, he forfeits God's blessing (and gives evidence that he does not belong to God).
 - ... Notice that his lack of pity is not just against the shepherds, but against the ***inhabitants***. The people were also rebellious and disobedient and they also incurred God's wrath — God will only "spare" (have pity) for a season (**Lam. 2:2, 17, 21**).
 - ... "Sad was the lot of Israel when foreigners made merchandise of them; worse was their condition when their own leaders showed them no pity; but worst of all when God Himself declares He will no longer pity them. Their plight has reached its climax." [Feinberg]
 - ... This is a reminder that there are no excuses when one is rebellious against the Lord. No one can say, "I didn't know..." or "Someone deceived me..." We have all received revelation from God and we are all accountable for what we have received (**Rom. 2:9-11, 14-15**).
 - ***I will cause the men to fall...*** — God will make the people fall to the power of another ruler, take away their physical prosperity (***land***) and keep them in subjection (***not deliver them***). Certainly this sounds like what happened when the Israelites were inhabited by Rome and dispersed to the nations and without their own land (and still without the Promised Land).
 - "[This] consists of a wholesale subjugation of the covenant people to neighboring powers and their kings. They devastated the land, and YHWH did nothing to intervene." [MacArthur]
 - If this passage is fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, then it is notable that the people declared to Pilate that Caesar was their king (Jn. 19:15) and then Caesar razed the city some 35 years later — "instead of finding deliverance in Caesar, they were devastated by his hand." [MacArthur, 317.]
- ✓ God had delivered Israel many times in the past, but this time, there would be no escape. The flock of God became the flock of slaughter because they rejected their Shepherd.
- ✓ They have a hope (10:9-12; Rom. 11); but they need to (must) repent.

Lessons Learned:

- **God is wrathful.** To say that God is wrathful means that He is committed to His righteousness.
 - ✓ God's wrath is His righteous response (retribution) against everything and everyone unholy.
 - ✓ To say that God is wrathful means that He is just — He doesn't "wink" at sin or overlook it. He takes every sin seriously, and He will righteously (fairly) judge all sin.
 - ✓ Sometimes His wrath is His judgment against sin now (Gen. 9 — flood; Acts 5 — Ananias)
 - ✓ Sometimes His wrath is His refusal to act for His covenant people Israel by letting them experience the consequences for their sins (v. 6b; Rom. 1:18, 24, 26, 28)
 - ✓ Don't assume that because all seems to be well that it is. Sin *will* be judged in all fullness (Rom. 12).

- **God is compassionate.** Despite His wrath, He pities people in their poor condition.
 - ✓ A student asked anthropologist Margaret Mead what the earliest sign of civilization was in a given culture. He thought she might say a clay pot, or a fish hook, or a grinding stone. Her answer was, “a healed femur” — because in the law of the jungle where only the fit survive, a healed femur means that someone cared enough to set the bone and then do the hunting and gathering while the injured man’s leg healed. That’s compassion. And God has compassion in infinite quantities.
 - ✓ Let no one ever say “God does not care.” In compassion, He sent a Shepherd to Israel (and one exemplified by Zechariah). And in compassion that Shepherd went to the cross to die for my sin.
 - ✓ In His compassion, God is patient with our failures and sins — for a time.
 - God *is* eternally patient (He will never stop being patient in His nature and attributes).
 - God *is* infinitely patient (there is no limit in His patience).
 - But His patience is *not* eternal and infinite with all individuals because the purpose of His patience is repentance (**Rom. 2:4; 2 Pt. 3:9**). When repentance is rejected (confirmed), He will stop being patient towards that individual and He will judge (**Mt. 12:24 // 13:13ff; Jn. 12:39f**).
- **Repentance is vital.**
 - ✓ While the word repentance is not in this passage, it is easily visible behind the curtain of words.
 - ✓ In **10:9** the people are regathered to the land because they remembered God (and repented).
 - ✓ When people are repentant, God does not judge; this book is built on a call to repentance (**1:4, 6**).
 - ✓ To repent means to turn to God for help with our sin, trusting that He will remove our guilt and believing that He is worth following and obeying (it’s worth living for Him).
 - ✓ Jesus, the Great Shepherd who is anticipated in this passage, is the object of that trust — we believe that He paid off our debt of sin and we believe it’s worth obeying Him (**Rom. 8:32**).
 - ✓ Like the photographer earlier, don’t get caught being in the right place and looking in the wrong direction. There will be no humor on the day of God’s judgment — only wailing and sorrow.
 - ✓ So if you not believed, I exhort you to believe today:
 - There is a judgment coming that you cannot escape.
 - There is a life Christ gives that is infinitely worth living.
 - God *is* compassionate, but there is great danger in rejecting Him and not repenting.

New member introductions: Richard and Janice Stroud

Benediction Prayer