

Zechariah Chapter 11

Verses 11:1-3: As a fire sweeping down to ravage the whole land of Israel, Zechariah described a fire of judgment that would consume the ungodly as a conflagration consumes trees. The devastation is not limited to spiritual judgment only, but includes the death of people as the land of Israel is judged. The language is the book's most poetic, "Lebanon," "Bashan" and "Jordan" represent the whole land as judgment sweeps from top to bottom covering the entire nation from the north, inland, and down the Jordan Valley to the southern border.

In stark contrast to chapters 9 and 10, in which Messiah is pictured as a wonderful Shepherd, this passage presents an ugly picture of the rejection of the Messiah, the true Shepherd. The prophet turns from the glories of the accepted Messiah at His second coming to the national apostasy and rejection of Messiah at His first coming.

Zechariah 11:1 "Open thy doors, O Lebanon, that the fire may devour thy cedars."

"Open thy doors, O Lebanon": By which may be meant, either the temple of Jerusalem, which was built of the cedars of Lebanon.

"The gates of which are said to open of themselves forty years before the destruction of Jerusalem, when Jochanan ben Zaccai, who lived at the same time, rebuked them, saying, O temple, temple, wherefore dost thou frighten thyself? I know thine end is to be destroyed; for so prophesied Zechariah, the son of Iddo, concerning thee, "open thy doors, O Lebanon".

So Lebanon (in Zechariah 10:10), is interpreted of the sanctuary, both by the Targum and by Jarchi. Or else it may be understood of Jerusalem, and of the whole land of Judea, because it was situated by it. It was the border of it on the north side.

"That the fire may devour thy cedars": Of which the temple was built, and the houses of Jerusalem, which were consumed by fire. Unless the fortresses of the land are meant. So the Targum paraphrases it, "and the fire shall consume your fortresses.

The cedars of Lebanon were famous for their beauty and strength.

Most Jewish and Christian interpreters regard the language as figurative. Thus the "cedars" are taken to mean the highest and noblest in the land while the cypress or firs represent the common people who are commanded to "howl". Because since the "cedars" have fallen there is no hope of their being spared.

As a fire sweeping down to ravage the whole land of Israel, Zechariah described a fire of judgment that would consume the ungodly as a consuming fire consumes trees.

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“Lebanon”, “Bashan” and “Jordan” (in verses 1-3), represent the whole land as judgment sweeps from top to bottom covering the entire nation from the north, inland, and down the Jordan Valley to the southern border.

Zechariah 11:2 "Howl, fir tree; for the cedar is fallen; because the mighty are spoiled: howl, O ye oaks of Bashan; for the forest of the vintage is come down."

“Howl ... fir tree”: If the mighty cedars have fallen, surely the more vulnerable smaller trees will be unable to stand.

“Oaks of Bashan”: The poem moves from Lebanon, on the northern border of Israel, to Bashan, east of the Sea of Galilee, known for its oaks and lush pastures (Amos 4:1; Mica 7:14).

This is a judgment coming upon God's people, because they have rejected the Lord of glory. They have refused their Messiah.

Zechariah 11:3 "[There is] a voice of the howling of the shepherds; for their glory is spoiled: a voice of the roaring of young lions; for the pride of Jordan is spoiled."

“Howling of the shepherds”: The shepherds lament the loss of their pastures, and the young lions their homes and food. Both are poetic figures of the misery that will occur in the land under the ravaging judgment.

From the heights of Lebanon, the destructive storm sweeps down on the land of Bashan, and the oaks, the pride of the land are likewise felled by the enemy to meet the wants of the invading army, and to construct his means of offence and defense. Thus, the wood hitherto practically inaccessible is brought low.

The desolating storm sweeps from the high lands to the low lands. The shepherds are forced to howl, because their splendor is laid waste. Namely, the pasture lands in which they were accustomed to for feeding and tending their flocks in the day of peace and quiet. The extensive fire extends even to the south of the land. Judah is wrapped in flames.

The thickets fringing the Jordan River which shut in that stream so closely that its waters could not be seen till the traveler was close on its banks are consumed by fire. That was the area which was the abode of lions and other beasts of prey in those days and they were destroyed. The pride of Jordan is rendered desolate and hence the voice of roaring of lions is heard wailing over the general ruin.

As the chapter unfolds, it becomes clear that this most likely prophesies the destruction of Jerusalem (in A.D. 70), and the subsequent devastation of the whole land, causing the death of one and a half million Jews, resulting in the dissolution of the Jewish state.

Verses 4-14: The cause for the calamity (of verses 1-3), is here given: the rejection of the true Shepherd. God used the prophet Zechariah as an actor playing the part of a shepherd to illustrate the true Shepherd, Jesus Christ, and the rejection He encountered. Instructions given (in verses 4-6), are enacted (in verses 7-14).

Verses 4-6: The Lord God said that His people were to be treated like sheep fattened for the slaughter, whose shepherds have no pity, but are only interested in money for the meat. Thus God will serve up His sheep for slaughter without pity.

With God's pity (Hosea 1:6), and protection withdrawn, they will be given over to their Roman "neighbors" and to the King", Caesar (John 19:14-15), who will ultimately lead them to their destruction (in A.D. 70), by the Roman army (John 11:47-50).

Zechariah 11:4 "Thus saith the LORD my God; Feed the flock of the slaughter;"

The prophet here proceeds to show the cause of the destruction just foretold, namely, the rejection of Messiah.

"Flock of ... slaughter" (Psalm 44:22). God's people doomed to slaughter by the Romans. Zechariah here represents typically Messiah, and performs in vision the actions enjoined. Hence the language is in part appropriate to him, but mainly to the Messiah that will come.

A million and a half perished in the Jewish war and one million one hundred thousand at the fall of Jerusalem. "Feed" implies that the Jews could not plead ignorance of God's will to execute their sin. Zechariah and the other prophets had by God's appointment "fed" them (Acts 20:28), with the word of God.

Teaching and warning them to escape from coming wrath by repentance: the type of Messiah, the chief Shepherd, who receives the commission of the Father, with whom He is one (Zech. 11:4). And Himself says (Zech. 11:7), "I will feed the flock of slaughter."

Zechariah did not live to "feed" literally the "flock of slaughter". Messiah alone "fed" those who, because of their rejection of Him, were condemned to slaughter. Jehovah Messiah is the speaker. It is He who threatens to inflict the punishments (Zech. 11:6, 8).

The typical breaking of the staff, performed in vision by Zechariah (Zech. 11:10), is fulfilled in His breaking the covenant with Judah. It is He who was sold for thirty pieces of silver (Zech. 11:12-13).

Zechariah is told by God in this Scripture to do the job of those who had misused their authority.

As a manifestation of God's mercy, an effort is made to save them. The prophet, representing the Lord as the true Shepherd of Israel, is commanded to feed them, and he, in obedience to the command, takes upon himself the office of the shepherd and endeavors to rescue them from the wicked shepherds who are leading them to certain destruction.

The obstinacy of the majority of those whom he seeks to save, compels him to give up the office and leave the flock to their utter misery and ruin.

The Lord God said that His people were to be treated like sheep fattened for the slaughter, whose shepherds have no pity, but are only interested in money for the meat. But because they would not take heed or listen, God will serve up His sheep for slaughter without pity.

Zechariah 11:5 "Whose possessors slay them, and hold themselves not guilty: and they that sell them say, Blessed [be] the LORD; for I am rich: and their own shepherds pity them not."

Not the Romans after Christ came, into whose hands they were delivered, and by whom they were slain in great numbers, not accounting it any sin to put them to death. But the priests, Scribes, Pharisees, and doctors, among the Jews, who ruined and destroyed their souls, by feeding them with poisonous doctrines.

Teaching them the commandments of men, and to observe the traditions of the elders. And to seek for life and salvation by the works of the law, which was a ministration of condemnation and death to them. And yet thought they did God and the souls of men good service.

"And they that sell them": As false teachers make merchandise of the souls of men.

"Say, Blessed be the Lord; for I am rich": Having devoured widows' houses and substances, under a pretense of long prayers. And enriched themselves through tithes of everything, and by other methods; as the Scribes and Pharisees did.

"And their own shepherds pity them not": Those who should have been concerned for the welfare of their souls had no compassion on them. Aben Ezra, Kimchi, and Ben Melech, interpret this of God, the Shepherd of Israel. The verb being singular, though the noun is plural. So God is called Makers, Creators (Psalm 149:2), and in this sense agree with the words (in verse 6).

The fifth verse illustrates the truth of the designation in the fourth verse. They may indeed, be described as sheep of slaughter, for "their possessors, meaning buyers, slay or strangle them, and hold themselves not guilty. And they that sell them say, Blessed by Jehovah, "for I am rich."

The buyers and sellers are those into whose hands the nation is delivered and who do with them as they please, namely, the Gentile powers. They are represented as thinking themselves "not guilty" in all their cruel actions in relation to the Jewish people.

My people hath been lost sheep: their shepherds have caused them to go astray: all that found them have devoured them. And their adversaries say we offend not, because they have sinned against Jehovah, the habitation of justice, Jehovah, the hope of their fathers.

Zechariah 11:6 "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 neighbor'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]."

"For I will no more pity the inhabitants of the land, saith the Lord": Or spare them; but cause his wrath to come upon them to the uttermost. As it did at the time of Jerusalem's destruction by the Romans.

"But, lo, I will deliver the men every one into his neighbor's hand": This seems to refer to the factions and divisions among themselves during the siege of Jerusalem, when multitudes fell into the hands of the zealots, and heads of parties, and perished by them.

"And into the hand of his king": Vespasian the Roman emperor. The Jews having declared, long before this time, that they had no king but Caesar (John 19:15), and now into his hands they were delivered up.

"And they shall smite the land": That is, the Romans shall lay waste the land of Judea.

"And out of their hand I will not deliver them": As formerly out of the hands of their neighbors, the Philistines, Ammonites, etc. and out of the captivity of Babylon. It denotes that their destruction would be an utter one; nor have they been delivered yet, though it has been almost 2000 years since.

"But, lo": This is God's way of calling attention to something great which He is going to do either with nations or individuals. In the solemn and awful words which follow that phrase, describes in advance the confusion, strife, hatred, and mutual destruction, which followed soon after the rejection of our Lord Jesus, their true Messiah and Shepherd. The detailed accounts which can be read in Josephus and even in the Talmud.

Hand of the king: This phrase must be understood as referring to the king of Judah's own choosing, that of a foreign oppressor and not of a native ruler.

With God's pity and protection withdrawn, they will be given over to their Roman "neighbors" and to their "King" Caesar who will ultimately lead them to their destruction (in A.D. 70), by the Roman army led by General Titus.

The First Jewish Roman War was fought between (67 and 70 A.D.). The campaign came to a brief halt with the death of Emperor Nero (on June 9, 68), launching his father's bid for the imperial power during the Year of the Four Emperors.

When his father, Vespasian, was declared emperor (on December 21, 69), Titus was left in charge of ending the Jewish rebellion, which he did in 70 A.D., successfully besieging and destroying the city and the Temple of Jerusalem. Over one million Jews were slaughtered in that assault, and almost half a million in subsequent Roman attacks in Palestine.

Titus (December 30, 39 – September 13, 81), was also a Roman Emperor who briefly reigned from 79 until his death in 81.

In the solemn words of the sixth verse, we have a foretaste of what would take place after the rejection of the good shepherd, and the care and protection of God over His people would be withdrawn.

Verses 7-14: Here is a record of Zechariah playing a dramatic role to act out the rejection of Christ that will lead to the judgment of Israel outlined (in verses 1-3).

Zechariah 11:7 "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."

“I will feed the flock”: The prophet did feed the truth of God to his people as a picture of what Messiah would do when He came.

“Poor of the flock”: Only the poor responded when Jesus came to feed the flock (Matt. 11:5; 1 Cor. 1:26). They were the lowly who would not follow the pride of the priest, scribes, and Pharisees, but believed on Jesus.

“Beauty . . . bands”: The prophet’s symbolic act called for him to take “two staffs.” Eastern shepherds often carried two sticks, a rod to ward off wild beasts and a staff to guide and retrieve wayward sheep (Psalm 23:4).

The staff speaks of Christ the Good Shepherd who expressed the love and grace of God by tenderly leading and protecting His people (Mark 6:34). While the rod speaks of His unifying ministry, binding together the scattered house of Israel into one fold (verse 14; Matt. 15:24).

The original shepherd took “two staves:” one to protect the sheep from wild beasts, and the other to assist the sheep in difficult and dangerous places. The names “Beauty” and Bands” symbolize God’s favor on the reunited Israel and Judah.

We proceed to what may be said to constitute the heart of the remarkable prophecy. Namely the actual feeding or shepherding of the flock, which, through their own obstinacy, became the flock of slaughter.

Beauty had reference, as we see (from verse 10), to the grace and loving kindness of God in keeping off their enemies from destroying them.

Bands (as we see from the 14th verse), that part of the Shepherd’s rule by which the sheep were kept united among themselves as one flock.

And so, because they were so equipped, He says again at the end of the seventh verse, “I fed the flock”.

Zechariah 11:8 "Three shepherds also I cut off in one month; and my soul loathed them, and their soul also abhorred me."

“Three shepherds also I cut off”: Though difficult to identify, one of the oldest interpretations is that this refers to the priests, elders and scribes of Israel.

Jesus bestowed grace and unity upon the populace, but confronted the hypocrisy of these religious leaders, and because they rejected Him all 3 offices were obliterated in a short time.

God ended the traditional offices of the mediators and in their place brought a new priesthood of believers (1 Pet. 2:5, 9; Rev. 1:6; 5:10; 20:6).

“My soul loathed them”: Literally it means “My soul was short with them,” referring to the limits of God’s patience toward the unrepentant.

Commentators generally view the cutting off of the three shepherds “as an act of God’s loving kindness toward the sheep of His pasture,” and as part of the beneficent care of the Good Shepherd for the flock.

So it might have been, if delivered from their false shepherds, the people as a whole had turned to Him. Who was sent to them of God to seek and to save, and Who in His one person combined the offices of Prophet, Priest, and King.

But as not only the leaders, both civil and religious, but the people in general, took up more and more an attitude of opposition and hostility toward Him, the “cutting off” of the three “shepherds.” Or the abolition of the three mediatorial offices, which is the outward sign of the suspension of God’s covenant relationship with them, must certainly be regarded also as an act of judgment on the nation as a whole.

1 Peter 2:5 “Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ.”

1 Peter 2:9 “But ye [are] a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should show forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light”:

My Soul loathed them: means “My soul was short with them,” referring to the limits of God’s patience toward the unrepentant.

Zechariah 11:9 "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."

“Eat every one the flesh of another” (see note on 7:13). In this drama, Zechariah played the unnatural role of a shepherd who abandons his sheep and stops teaching and protecting them.

Those who refused to believe were to be given over to pursue their own desires and left exposed to deadly enemies. In the roman siege (of A.D. 70), some of the starving inhabitants did resort to cannibalism (Jer. 19:9).

(In Chapter 7), God said that He would not listen, reflecting a severe form of God’s wrath by which He abandons disobedient sinners.

These things became terribly and literally true when, after the rejection of the “Good Shepherd”, the terrible calamities of war, famine, pestilence, internal strife, and mutual destruction overtook the poor deluded people.

Zechariah 11:10 "And I took my staff, [even] Beauty, and cut it asunder, that I might break my covenant which I had made with all the people."

“Break my covenant”: Apparently this refers to God’s promise to restrain the nations from decimating Israel if she would consistently obey (Deut. 28:1-14). God set aside His kind and gracious protection and His providential care for His people, allowing Rome to invade and destroy Israel (Luke 19:41-44; 21:24).

Zechariah 11:11 "And it was broken in that day: and so the poor of the flock that waited upon me knew that it [was] the word of the LORD."

The believing remnant of Christ’s day knew God’s Word was being fulfilled. They knew judgment was coming, but avoided the long-term consequences by faith in Christ.

This staff called Beauty (or pleasantness or favor), was the symbol of God’s protection over them in keeping off the nations from attacking them from without. When Israel was in God’s favor and under His gracious protection, then he caused even their enemies to be at peace with them.

When the Gentile nations gathered against them to devour, the Shepherd of Israel soon broke the arm of their strength and prevented them from doing harm to His people. But when He ceased to be their defense, then they became a ready prey to the Gentile world powers, which are well symbolized in the bible as “Wild Beasts”.

The manifest proof that the covenant which the Shepherd of Israel had made with the nations on Israel’s behalf was broken, served as a demonstration to the poor of the flock that which had been foretold was indeed the Word of God.

Zechariah 11:12 "And I said unto them, If ye think good, give [me] my price; and if not, forbear. So they weighed for my price thirty [pieces] of silver."

“Thirty pieces of silver,” According to (Exodus 21:32), was the price paid to the master whose slave had been gored by an ox. A sound slave was considered to be worth twice that amount. This insult would ultimately be ascribed to the Messiah Himself (Matt. 27:9-10). This is the supreme insult, the Messiah, God’s Son, worth only the price of an incapacitated, gored slave!

Zechariah carried on the drama by symbolically picturing Jesus asking those He came to shepherd what they felt He was worth to them. In a mocking response, the leaders offered 30 silver pieces which was the amount of compensation paid for a slave gored by an ox.

This is exactly what Judas Iscariot was paid to betray the Great Shepherd (Matt. 26:14-16). The Jews of Jesus’ day who offered that amount were saying He was worth no more than a common slave.

Zechariah 11:13 "And the LORD said unto me, Cast it unto the potter: a goodly price that I was prized at of them. And I took the thirty [pieces] of silver, and cast them to the potter in the house of the LORD."

The prophet received further instruction in acting out the drama that pictures the rejection of Christ, namely to throw the 30 pieces into the temple. This was fulfilled when Judas Iscariot, laden with guilt, went back and threw the blood money on the temple floor. The priests gathered the money and used it to buy a field from a potter (Matt. 27:3-10).

“Goodly price”: This ultimate sarcasm from God greeted the ultimate insult from humanity.

Zechariah 11:14 "Then I cut asunder mine other staff, [even] Bands, that I might break the brotherhood between Judah and Israel."

The breaking of the first staff (verse 10), preceded the Jew’s rejection of the Shepherd, while the breaking of this rod once symbolizing the nation’s unity (verse 7), followed His rejection, being fulfilled in the Roman breakup of the Jewish commonwealth.

Josephus recorded that in the Roman conquering, the internal dissension among the people in their conflicting parties set Jew against Jew so that they struck each other as cruelly as the Romans struck them.

The retention of this second staff for some time after the first had been broken is probably meant to indicate His reluctance to give up the flock which had been so dear to Him by His waiting until the very end to be gracious to them.

God has broken His relationship with those who have rejected Jesus.

Romans 9:6 "Not as though the word of God hath taken none effect. For they [are] not all Israel, which are of Israel:"

God had not broken His covenant with Abraham. He just will not keep covenant with them, because of blood lines. He recognizes Abraham's seed, now, as those who accepted His Son.

Galatians 3:29 "And if ye [be] Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."

Verses 15-16: With the removal of the true Shepherd, the drama called for the prophet to play a foolish shepherd, who depicted the Antichrist of Daniel's 70th week (2 Thess. 2:3; John 5:43; Dan. 9:27).

Zechariah 11:15-16 "And the LORD said unto me, Take unto thee yet the instruments of a foolish shepherd." "For, lo, I will raise up a shepherd in the land, [which] shall not visit those that be cut off, neither shall seek the young one, nor heal that that is broken, nor feed that that standeth still: but he shall eat the flesh of the fat, and tear their claws in pieces."

With the removal of the true Shepherd, the drama called for the prophet to play a foolish shepherd, who depicted the Antichrist of Daniel's 70th week.

Zechariah's prophecy jumped from the first century A.D. to the last days before the second coming, omitting the present mystery of the church age (see notes on 9:9-15).

This foolish (wicked), shepherd had a broken staff or club which he used to beat stubborn sheep into submission, something clearly inappropriate for a shepherd who thoughtfully and tenderly cared for this sheep.

God permitted this wicked shepherd to arise, to destroy the sheep. Because they did not choose the Good Shepherd, Israel will receive a foolish one who will do absolutely the opposite of what is expected for shepherds; he will destroy the sheep (verse 16). This is exactly what the Antichrist will do. (Dan. 9:27; Matt. 24:15-22).

Zechariah 11:17 "Woe to the idol shepherd that leaveth the flock! the sword [shall be] upon his arm, and upon his right eye: his arm shall be clean dried up, and his right eye shall be utterly darkened."

"His arm ... right eye": Zechariah condemned the worthless shepherd, noting that his strength ("arm"), and his intelligence ("eye"), would be taken away from him (Dan. 7:9-14; 24:27; 8:23-25; 2 Thess. 2:8; Rev. 19:20; 20:10).

The arm is the emblem of might and the eye of intelligence. These are the two things in which the evil shepherd will sum up in himself, anti-christian world-power will trust, and in which he will boast himself.

The career of this evil shepherd shall be short, and his end will be sudden destruction.

And this shall be the end of him who shall be slain with the breath of messiah's mouth, and be destroyed by the brightness of His appearing.

Zechariah Chapter 11 Questions

1. Open thy doors, O Lebanon, that the fire may devour thy _____.
2. What were the cedars of Lebanon famous for?
3. What is verse 2 speaking of?
4. Why are the shepherds howling?
5. There will be no authority in the _____ anymore.
6. Who is verse 4 telling to feed the sheep?
7. What is verse 5 speaking of?
8. Beauty means _____.
9. Who are the three shepherds, possibly?
10. What does verse 9 speak of?
11. What caused God to break His staff (Beauty)?
12. Who realized this was the Word of the LORD, that Zechariah spoke?
13. What is verse 12 speaking of?
14. Explain the symbolism in the thirty pieces of silver.
15. Why does verse 14 say, He broke the other staff (Bands)?
16. Who are Abraham's seed?
17. Who are some of the possibilities the foolish shepherd could be?
18. Woe to the idol _____ that leaveth the flock!
19. What kind of shepherd is this, then?