THE TRAGEDY OF REJECTING CHRIST

Zechariah 11:1-17

By

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Zechariah Lesson 14

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Zechariah 11:1-17

Nobody likes tragedies. Wars, famines, epidemics, earthquakes, floods, tornadoes, terrible accidents—all result in tragic loss of human life and in difficult consequences for the survivors.

Nobody likes to study tragedies. I suppose that we all have a morbid curiosity that attracts us to read the papers and watch the evening news when great tragedies occur, but it would be unbearably depressing to dwell on these things constantly. And yet the study of tragedies can yield positive results if we learn to avoid the factors that led to the tragedy and to prepare ourselves for the time when we may face similar circumstances.

Zechariah 11 is an anatomy of history’s greatest tragedy. The interesting thing is, this analysis of this tragedy was not written after the fact. It was penned 500 years in advance! And yet it outlines with amazing detail the tragedy of the nation Israel rejecting Jesus as their Messiah and the awful consequences that would follow. It teaches us a vital lesson:

The greatest tragedy possible is to reject Christ, the Good Shepherd.

Zechariah 11 stands in stark contrast to the glowing promises of chapters 9 and 10. The prophet has just spoken of how God will save and regather His chosen people, restore them, and strengthen them so that they will walk in His name. But then chapter 11 hits with predictions of ruin and doom. What’s going on here?

In order for God’s people to appreciate and not neglect their great salvation (Heb. 2:3), they need to keep the alternative in view, namely, what it means to reject Christ and come under God’s awful judgment. We’re all prone to develop a ho-hum attitude toward the things of God and even toward the Savior who shed His blood for us. It’s easy for those of us raised in the church to become so familiar with the story of salvation that we think, “That’s nice!” But we go out the door and pursue our careers, our families, and our
hobbies, without giving much thought or effort during the week to the things of God.

Zechariah 11 was written to God’s covenant people to warn them about the ultimate tragedy of rejecting the Good Shepherd. Yes, godless pagans need to be warned about the consequences of rejecting Jesus Christ, but so do those who attend church regularly. Though we profess to have accepted Christ as Savior, it’s easy to fall into a way of life where practically we reject Him.

Our text falls into three sections. Verses 1-3 describe the ruin of the land when God’s judgment is unleashed. Verses 4-14 portray, through a prophetic parable acted out by Zechariah, the nation’s rejection of the Good Shepherd, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the consequences. Verses 15-17 predict the nation’s subjection to the foolish or worthless shepherd, who will exploit them and then come under judgment himself. So Zechariah graphically portrays Israel’s suffering for rejecting the Good Shepherd. First, we need to explain the text; then we will apply it.

EXPLANATION OF THE TEXT:

Some scholars understand 11:1-3 as a general description that could fit any invasion of the land. But, as James Boice argues (The Minor Prophets [Baker], 2:538), since chapter 9 specifically described both the invasion of Alexander the Great and the Maccabean wars, it is reasonable to think that these verses describe a specific situation. The context of chapter 11 indicates that verses 1-3 refer to the destruction of the land that occurred in the Roman wars of A.D. 66-70, when Titus destroyed Jerusalem and slaughtered the Jews. The survivors were scattered worldwide and Israel ceased to exist as a nation for 1,900 years.

Lebanon, Bashan, and the Jordan (11:1-3) represent the whole of the land. The destruction of Lebanon’s stately cedar forests was literal, but also may figuratively portray judgment on the nation’s leaders. Even the shepherds wail over the end of their peaceful way of life.

Verses 4-17 describe a prophetic drama that Zechariah was to act out for the nation. First, he portrays the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ (11:4-14); and then the worthless shepherd (11:15-17). God tells Zechariah to pasture the flock doomed to slaughter (11:4).
This may refer to the sheep being kept for temple sacrifice. The shepherds didn’t care about the welfare of this flock. They just saw the flock as a means toward their own prosperity (11:5). This ultimately refers to the greedy religious leaders of Jesus’ day, who made a comfortable living off of religion, but had no concern for the people. God interjects that He will no longer have pity on the people of the land, but will give them up to those who strike the land (11:6).

In obedience to God’s command, Zechariah takes two staffs, one called Favor (picturing God’s favor on Israel) and the other called Union (picturing the brotherhood between Judah and Israel). In one month he gets rid of the three shepherds (presumably by firing them). One commentator (Joyce Baldwin, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi [IVP], p. 181) says that the first words of verse 8 “probably are the most enigmatic of the whole Old Testament!” No less than 40 interpretations have been suggested, so we can only be tentative.

The best view is probably that the three shepherds represent the three main offices in Israel: prophet, priest, and king. “One month” represents a relatively short period of time. Because the religious and political leaders rejected Jesus as Messiah and abused their roles for personal gain, and because in His person Jesus fulfilled the roles of prophet, priest, and king, He abolished those roles during His earthly ministry. John the Baptist was the last of the prophets. After A.D. 70, there was no temple and no high priest to offer sacrifices. And after that time there would be no king of the Jews, because there was no Jewish nation.

Then (11:8b) the shepherd grows impatient with the flock and they grow weary of him. So he gives up his role as shepherd and leaves the flock to its fate. Some die, others are annihilated, and the remainder eat one another’s flesh. This happened literally during Titus’ siege of Jerusalem, as the Jewish historian Josephus described (The Wars of the Jews [VI:III:4]).

Then (11:10) the shepherd breaks his staff called Favor, signifying breaking his covenant with the nations. God had previously restrained the nations from destroying Israel, but now that restraint is lifted, allowing Titus to destroy the city and the nation. The afflicted of the flock (11:11), who recognize that this is the word of the Lord, may refer to believers in Jerusalem during the siege. Titus
unaccountably lifted the siege for a few days. The Christians re-
membered the Lord’s warning to flee (Matt. 24:16) and left the city
for Pella, thus escaping the fate that shortly fell on the rest.

Verses 12-13 describe the nation’s rejection of the shepherd. He
asks for his wages, signifying the termination of his role as
shepherd. They weigh out for him 30 pieces of silver, which was
the price of a slave who had been gored by an ox (Exod. 21:32).
This shows how cheaply they valued his service! It was like saying,
“You’re about as useful to us as a gored slave!” The Lord, with
sarcasm, instructs him to throw this “magnificent price” to the
potter. Zechariah does so in the house of the Lord.

Matthew 27:3-10 describes the fulfillment of this prophecy.
Judas betrayed Jesus for 30 pieces of silver, but then felt remorse
and tried to return the money to the Jewish leaders. When they
refused it, he flung it at their feet in the temple and went out and
hanged himself. The chief priests, who paid Judas to betray Jesus
so that they could kill Him, were too scrupulous to put blood
money in the temple treasury. So they used it to buy a potter’s field
as a burial place for strangers, thus fulfilling Zechariah’s prophecy.

There is a difficulty in Matthew 27:9 in that Matthew ascribes
the Old Testament quotation about the 30 pieces of silver and the
potter’s field to Jeremiah, not to Zechariah. This is a thorny prob-
lem, with several proposed solutions (see D. A. Carson, Expositor’s
Bible Commentary [Zondervan], 8:562-566; or, Hobart Freeman, An
Some say that since Jeremiah was at the beginning of some lists of
the prophetic writings, Matthew may have used his name (“the
Jeremiah scroll”) to refer to the section from which the less promi-
nent prophet, Zechariah, was contained. A more complicated, but
perhaps better, answer is that Matthew brought together proph e-
cies from both Jeremiah and from Zechariah 11, and refers to them
by the name of the more prominent prophet.

There is also debate about why the money was thrown to a
potter. Probably the potter was seen as one of the lowest of the
working classes. Clay pots were for common use and cheaply re-
placed when broken. By throwing the money before the potter in
the temple, the prophet reinforced the message of how cheaply
Israel regarded its shepherd (Charles Feinberg, God Remembers [American Board of Mission to the Jews], pp. 209-210).

After throwing the silver to the potter, the shepherd cuts his second staff, Union, into pieces, signifying the breaking of the brotherhood between Judah and Israel (11:14). This predicts the intense fighting among the Jews that Josephus describes, which led to the Roman invasion and final conquest of A.D. 70 (T. V. Moore, Zechariah [Banner of Truth], pp. 182-183).

Between verses 14 and 15 is the entire church age. Then, in the final section (11:15-17), the Lord instructs Zechariah to take up the equipment of a foolish (morally corrupt) shepherd to show that God will raise up a self-seeking, worthless shepherd, who will ravage the flock for his own advantage. After he serves God’s purpose, God will then judge him by withering his arm and blinding his right eye. His arm that should have been used to defend the flock, destroyed it. His eye that should have kept watch over the flock instead looked for opportunities for personal advantage. Thus God judges him (Merrill Unger, Zechariah: Prophet of Messiah’s Glory [Zondervan], p. 204).

Who is this evil shepherd? Some argue that it is Rome, which became the “shepherd” of Israel after her leaders cried out, “We have no king but Caesar” (John 19:15; see Moore, pp. 184-185). While Rome may represent an initial fulfillment, the prophecy probably also looks ahead to the Antichrist. In league with Antichrist will be a powerful false prophet, a religious figure, who will cause the world to worship Antichrist (Rev. 13:11-18). In contrast to Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who laid down His life for the sheep, this false shepherd will devour the flock for his own greedy purposes. But when God, who raised him up as an instrument of judgment, is finished with him, God will judge him.

We had to work through that lengthy explanation in order to apply the text properly!

**APPLICATION OF THE TEXT:**

1. Rejecting Christ results in great tragedy, both personally and nationally.

   When a nation comes under God’s judgment, the individuals in the nation suffer greatly. While the Jewish nation was in many
respects primarily liable for rejecting and killing her Messiah (1 Thess. 2:13-16), when any nation defiantly turns against the light that God has given it, it comes under His judgment (Rom. 1:18-32). What Israel did nationally in crucifying her Savior, every sinner has done individually. When the Lord no longer has pity on you and gives you over to ruthless rulers and to wicked people who are out to destroy you (Zech. 11:6), you’re in a bad situation! Our text reveals four horrible tragedies that stem from rejecting Christ.

A. Rejecting Christ results in being exploited by ruthless shepherds.

Bob Dylan has a song, “You Gotta Serve Somebody.” If you don’t serve the Lord Jesus Christ, you will be subject to selfish shepherds who will use you for their own purposes. The devil, the world, and sin are not friendly shepherds! They promise you fun and freedom and they give you enough initial payoff to lure you in. Having sex outside of marriage is pleasurable, at first. Doing drugs at a party makes you forget your troubles for a while. Piling up a fortune to spend on yourself can bring a very comfortable lifestyle. But living for selfish pleasure is short-sighted, because it forgets the inevitable fact of death and eternity. Living for sin ultimately corrupts and enslaves you, leading to eternal doom (2 Pet. 2:18-19).

Phillip Keller, in A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23 [Zondervan], describes watching a flock of sheep being led down to a pristine, clear mountain stream to drink. But some of the sheep couldn’t wait for what the shepherd was leading them to. So they stopped to drink at filthy pools along the way that had been contaminated by the manure and urine of previous flocks. It quenched their immediate thirst, but they didn’t realize that it would eventually infect them with parasites and disease. Then Keller observes (p. 57),

People often try this pursuit or that with the causal comment, “So what? I can’t see that it’s going to do any harm!” Little do they appreciate that often there is a delayed reaction and that considerable time may elapse before the full impact of their misjudgment strikes home. Then suddenly they are in deep trouble and wonder why.

As Charles Feinberg sums it up, “Nothing in the world is so disastrous as sin” (The Minor Prophets [Moody Press], p. 325).
You've gotta serve somebody! Will it be Christ, the Good Shepherd, or the evil shepherd who kills and destroys (John 10:10-14)?

B. Rejecting Christ results in being exploited by your fellow man.

This comes through repeatedly in the chapter: “I shall cause the men to fall, each into another’s power” (11:6). “Let those who are left eat one another’s flesh” (11:9). “Then I cut my second staff, Union, in pieces, to break the brotherhood between Judah and Israel” (11:14).

If you don’t have Jesus Christ as your Shepherd, you are thrown into a dog-eat-dog world. It’s you against the next guy, because everyone is looking out for number one. When I was in Boot Camp in the Coast Guard, James 3:16 hit me in a fresh way. It sums up life in the world: “For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing.” Or, as he goes on to say, “What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? You lust and do not have, so you commit murder. You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel” (James 4:1-2). That’s the spirit of the world: exploit the other guy for my advantage!

While because of the flesh we’re all prone to seek our own way, the fruit of the Spirit stands in stark contrast to James’ description: “Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal. 5:22-23). Our relationships in our homes and our church should be marked by these qualities, not by the deeds of the flesh (Gal. 5:19-21).

C. Rejecting Christ results in the devastation of the land.

Verses 1-3 in poetic form lament the destruction of the land. In the Bible, the land of Israel is described as heavily forested in parts, with lush pastureland in other parts. Today, because of wars and God’s judgment, the place is largely a desert (although they’re working on reforestation). Around the globe, greedy entrepreneurs wipe out the rain forests and deplete natural resources for their own profit. Poachers threaten endangered species without any concern for the future. Christians should worship the Creator, not the creation. But also, we should be good stewards of the environment, because God entrusted His creation to our care.
D. Rejecting Christ results ultimately in being abandoned by God.

Israel rejected her Shepherd and her Shepherd rejected Israel (11:6, 8-9). Some of the most chilling words in the Bible are when the Jewish leaders shouted to Pilate concerning Jesus, “His blood shall be on us and on our children!” (Matt. 27:25). What a horrible judgment to call down on yourself! Think of the history of the Jews for the past 1,900 years, culminating in the Holocaust! As we know from Romans 11 (and from Zechariah), the Lord has not permanently rejected Israel. He will yet redeem them and use them in His sovereign purpose. But there is nothing worse than rejecting the Lord Jesus Christ to the point that He finally consigns you to eternal judgment!

But we need to consider briefly what it means to reject Christ and the opposite, what it means to accept Him. If religious people like the Jews, who professed to believe the Scriptures, could reject their Good Shepherd, we must take care so as not to make the same mistake!

2. To reject Christ means not to value Him properly.

The real meaning of whether or not you truly accept or reject Christ is tied up in your response to His request (11:12), “Give me my wages.” The wages that the Lord desired from Israel were their love, devotion, and obedience. But instead they valued Him at the price of a worthless slave.

It’s a question that each of us needs to consider carefully: At what price do I value the Lord? If we value the Lord, it will be reflected in the way we live. Do we value the pleasures of sin above the pleasure of knowing Christ? Do we give Him a couple of hours on Sunday now and then, but live the rest of the week for ourselves? Do we drop a few bucks in the offering plate when our guilt level rises, while we squander the rest on our toys? Or, do we submit all that we are and have to His lordship? Our time is not ours, but His. Our money is not ours, but His. Our lives are not ours, but His.

3. The alternative to rejecting Christ is to value Him properly.

In Matthew 13:44-46, Jesus said,
The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field, which a man found and hid again; and from joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking fine pearls, and upon finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

Do those examples describe how you value Jesus? With Paul, can you say, “I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ” (Phil. 3:8)?

To realize and apprehend all that Jesus is worth is a lifelong quest. As Paul went on to say, he had not yet arrived, but he pressed on toward the goal (Phil. 3:13, 14). But ask yourself, “Is Jesus more precious to me now than He was a year ago, or five years ago?” Is there progress in my life in valuing Jesus above everything and everyone else?

The starting point is to value His death on the cross for you as the supreme gift. To accept that gift, you trash your good works, your love of sin, and your love of self. You say, “Lord, I should be the one to die, because I have sinned and am guilty in Your sight. But I trust in Your death on my behalf as the just penalty for my sins. I submit myself to You as my Good Shepherd.”

**Conclusion**

Jesus told the story (Luke 14:16-24) of a man giving a dinner, who sent out invitations. But those he invited made up excuses for why they could not attend. “I have bought a piece of land and need to go out and look at it.” “I have bought some oxen and need to try them out.” “I have married a wife and need to spend time with her.” Those excuses are not sinful activities in and of themselves. There is nothing wrong with purchasing land or oxen, or with getting married. What’s wrong is when we value those activities more than we value dinner with Jesus!

Even so, those who know the gospel invitation need to be warned about the tragedy of rejecting the invitation. Those who are familiar with the things of God can reject Christ because they value other legitimate things more than they value the Good Shepherd.
Lucy and Linus were talking. Linus said, “I’ve been thinking. Charlie Brown has really been a dedicated baseball manager. He’s devoted his whole life to the team. We should give him a testimonial dinner.”

Lucy replies, “Is he that deserving? How about a testimonial snack?”

Make sure that you don’t just give Jesus a testimonial snack!

**Discussion Questions**

1. Does a love for this world indicate that a person is not saved or not sanctified? See 1 John 2:15-17.

2. How would you answer a young person who says, “I want to enjoy life before I yield to Jesus Christ; I’ll do that later”?

3. To what extent should Christians be concerned about the environment? Where’s the biblical balance?

4. How can we grow to value Jesus properly? What are some common hindrances in this process?

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