

Zechariah 11:15-17

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The LORD instructs Zechariah to act as a foolish leader who cares nothing for his people to illustrate the wicked behavior of a future leader He will install. He then pronounces judgment on that leader for his evil deeds of exploiting the people he was assigned to serve.

In Zechariah 11:7–14, the prophet acted as a good leader and cared for the oppressed Judeans using two staves: one is called Favor and the other Union. He dismissed the other leaders because they exploited the people with no remorse (Zechariah 11:5).

Later, he renounced his commission and urged the people to pay him if the word seemed good. They paid him a low amount of silver, thirty pieces, the amount required to redeem a servant. God told Zechariah to donate it to the potter for the temple, to “throw it” to him. This foreshadowed Judas throwing into the temple the thirty pieces of silver that he received to betray Jesus (Matthew 27:3-5).

Finally, Zechariah broke the two staves, signifying that God would remove His favor from Israel and would not unify Judah (the southern kingdom) and Israel (the northern kingdom) for a time. Instead of Israel joining Judah and reuniting the entire nation of Israel, Judah would join Israel in exile.

In the present section, God instructed the prophet to act as a foolish leader to illustrate how a future ruler would neglect and oppress the Judeans. He then pronounced judgment against that future shepherd for his worthlessness and wickedness. As Zechariah reported the news to the people of Judah, he began with a statement confirming the divine source of his message: *The LORD said to me* (v. 15).

The Hebrew term for *LORD* is “Yahweh,” the covenant name of God. That name insists that God is existence itself. It speaks of God’s character and His relationship with His covenant people (Exodus 3:14, 34:6). That the prophet told his audience that *the LORD said to me* means the message he was about to proclaim did not originate from him. Instead, it came from the LORD, Judah’s Ruler or Suzerain, who is all-powerful.

The message began here, where the *LORD said to Zechariah, Take again for yourself the equipment of a foolish shepherd* (v 15). A *shepherd* is responsible for feeding, guiding, and defending his sheep, since they are some of the least intelligent of livestock, and are in need of guidance in order to survive. Sheep are not capable of fighting to protect themselves from predators.

Sheep need constant care. The LORD again used this imagery of a shepherd to urge Zechariah to lead the Judeans, but this time as a *foolish shepherd*. He added the word *again* to connect this verse to verse 7, where God instructed Zechariah to shepherd Judah well. Saying *again* indicates that the present appointment to act as a *foolish shepherd* corresponds to and follows the previous instruction to act as a wise shepherd.

Previously, the prophet acted as a good *shepherd*, carrying two staffs to care for the Judeans. This time, however, he would act as a *foolish* one.

The term translated as *foolish* is “*ēvilî*” in the Hebrew text. It describes a stupid man who does not act at the appropriate time (Proverbs 13:16). He is a failure in life and in his word (Proverbs 10:14, 14:17). He is a servant to the wise, due to his inadequacy as a leader. And he is an unreasonable man (Proverbs 11:29, 22:15). In Zechariah, the LORD ordered the prophet to play that role as a means of demonstrating to Judah what was to come. The LORD then explained the rationale for His command and began with the term *for behold* (v. 16).

The particle *behold* often occurs in contexts where an unexpected event is about to take place. In our passage, the LORD used the term to call attention to the words He was about to say to prepare His audience to focus and listen carefully. As the listeners gave undivided attention to the divine message, God pictured the behavior of a future leader of Judah and declared, *I am going to raise up a shepherd in the land* (v 16). The pronoun *I* is emphatic, indicating that God alone is the one who would install the wicked ruler as a means of judging Judah.

The LORD described four characteristics that the future leader would lack. First, he would *not care for the perishing* (v 16). The Hebrew verb translated as *care* is “*pāqad*.” It can mean to inquire about someone, be interested in someone, or take care of someone. This is the meaning intended here. Using the shepherd metaphor, the LORD declared that the future foolish leader would not manifest any interest in his people. He would not look for the lost. He would be careless and insensitive. He will only care for himself.

Second, the leader would not *seek the scattered*. To *seek* means to look for someone or something. It implies an activity and requires an effort on the part of the one trying to find the lost person or item. Its use here tells us that the *foolish* leader would be faithless. He would not deploy any effort to seek the wanderers.

Third, the future leader of Judah would not *heal the broken* (v 16). To *heal* means to restore or to make whole. It encompasses a range of activities such as revitalizing a sick body (2 Kings 20:5), repairing a destroyed altar (1 Kings 18:30), and fixing a smashed piece of pottery (Jeremiah 19:11). In Zechariah, the false leader would do nothing to help the sick and injured.

This foolish leader contrasts with the wise leader Zechariah pictured in the previous section. This likely foreshadows the contrast between Jesus the Messiah and the callous and exploitative Jewish leaders of His day. While the foolish leader shows no care for those in need, Jesus is a shepherd who will leave the ninety nine sheep in order to recover the one who is lost (Luke 15:4-7). Jesus castigated Israel’s leaders for their exploitation of the people, accusing them of robbing widows and turning God’s temple into a den of thieves (Matthew 21:13, 23:14)

Fourth, Judah’s wicked leader would not *sustain the one standing* (v 16). In short, the ruler would not even care for the healthy people, who need little attention.

Instead of caring for the people, the ruler would *devour the flesh of the fat sheep* (v 16). Their only focus will be in exploiting the people they were appointed to serve. Instead of guarding and guiding the sheep, this leader will just eat the *fat sheep* and let the rest get eaten by predators or otherwise perish.

The picture painted is of a short-sighted shepherd focused only on satisfying his immediate appetite. Such an uncaring shepherd will soon end up with no flock remaining. Thus the picture painted by Zechariah is of a failing people doomed to scatter.

The bad leader(s) would fail in his/their duties to protect the lives of the Judean citizens and guide them in truth and righteousness. Instead, this leader would mistreat and kill them to satisfy his appetites. The leaders of Jesus's day fit this description. They completely discounted the great benefit Jesus gave ministering to the people, and they plotted to kill Jesus in order to save their own station (John 11:48).

The leader would not be satisfied to just eat the fatted sheep. He would *tear off their hoofs* (v 16).

The idiomatic expression *tear off the hoofs* describes how someone searches for the last piece of edible meat on an animal's carcass. It thus pictures the intense greed of the leader; he will extract every drop he can from his flock.

That *foolish shepherd* would ignore the divine laws, show no interest in caring for God's people, and brutally abuse them. Jesus gave a similar picture when he spoke of the bad leaders of His day, accusing them of devouring widow's houses (Matthew 23:14). A widow of that day would have possessed little to nothing, but the Pharisees took from them for themselves anyway.

Consequently, the LORD declared, *Woe to the worthless shepherd* (v. 17). The term *woe* (" 'ôy" in Hebrew) was used in ancient Israel as a mourning shout at funerals (Jeremiah 34:5; 1 Kings 13:30). Here, the Suzerain God used it to suggest doom which He would visit on the *foolish shepherd*, described here as *worthless*.

In the Old Testament, the term *worthless* (" 'elil" in Hebrew) usually describes idols (Isaiah 2:8). It portrays them as powerless and motionless (Psalm 115:4–8). The idols are useless because they are incapable of doing the job assigned them by worshippers. The people ask them for benefit, but they are incapable of providing it.

In Zechariah, the LORD characterized the *shepherd* as *worthless* because he does not do his job. The leaders of Israel are supposed to serve the people. They are supposed to teach, lead, and to create benefit for them. A good leader is supposed to guard and protect. But this shepherd is *worthless* because *he leaves the flock*. An absent shepherd is no shepherd at all. This is a further picture that the leader did nothing to care for the people—he is only interested in himself.

Because he is useless as a leader, and does not benefit his people, *a sword will be on his arm and on his right eye! His arm will be totally withered and his right eye will be blind* (v 17).

The *arm* typically represents strength. The *eye* is often used to represent a person's decisions or judgment (Deuteronomy 7:16, 13:8, 15:9). In our passage, however, the leader would lose both. They will lose their strength as well as their ability to make good assessments and render sound judgement.

This would certainly fit the leaders of Jesus's day. Their judgment was exceedingly bad. They ignored the ramifications of Jesus's miracles, only worrying that the supernatural wonders that

He performed might cause the people to follow Jesus instead of them. They refused to contemplate that a man who could raise someone from the dead and heal the blind might actually be someone they should listen to. But when they observed Jesus's miracles they only sought all the more to kill Him for fear the people would follow Him, and they would lose their position of privilege (John 12:10-11). This certainly describes someone with terrible judgment, a fulfillment that *his right eye will be blind*.

In contrast, the Messiah is predicted to be a ruler who will "shepherd My people Israel" (Matthew 2:6; Micah 5:2). Jesus fulfilled that prophecy in part by showing that He was willing to serve the people and pursue their best interest. Jesus had compassion on the people because He saw they were like sheep without a shepherd (Mark 6:34). This shows that in His day the leaders fulfilled this prophecy of being like a *worthless shepherd who leaves the flock*. Jesus might have had this in mind when He noted to His Father that He had faithfully kept and not abandoned His flock of disciples, save Judas who betrayed Him (John 17:12).

The leaders of Jesus's day were self-seeking and corrupt. Within a generation they lost their power and position to Rome, in whom they had trusted. This fulfilled the picture of the worthless shepherd, *his arm will be totally withered*. Israel's leadership put all their confidence in Rome, even saying they had no king but Caesar, in order to get Jesus crucified (John 19:15). This was terrible judgment (*eye will be blind*); Rome only served the interest of Rome. Predictably, roughly forty years later, Rome destroyed Jerusalem and with it the power of the Jewish leaders (*a sword will be on his arm*).

Since the prophesied *foolish shepherd* is singular, this might focus on a specific person such as Caiaphas who served as high priest, or Annas his father-in-law who seems to have been the real power behind the high priesthood (Luke 3:2). This might indicate the outsized influence top leaders have on leadership as a whole. We know that some members of the ruling council (the Sanhedrin) supported Jesus, but it appears that they were cut out of the process of Jesus's trial.

But just as the individual nations can be representative of other nations, so one leader can be representative of others. We saw in Chapter 10 God pronounce judgment on Assyria and Egypt, which likely also indicates that God will judge other vile nations. Two others are highlighted in the first verses of Chapter 11, namely Lebanon and Bashan. So this prophecy likely refers both to the top leader, as well as those who follow him.

What they all have in common is that they will be judged for their prideful, self-seeking exploitation of others. God has made it clear that His design is for people to live in harmony, serving one another in love. This is true in the Old as well as the New Testament (Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:37-39). Throughout scripture God promises to greatly reward those who follow His ways, while those who exploit others will suffer substantial judgment.

This is true on a corporate as well as individual level (Romans 2:6-7). God's people are never in danger of being rejected from being His people. But they still reap what they sow in terms of consequences for their decisions (Galatians 6:8; 2 Corinthians 5:10). Therefore, we can all learn from this text that God's word never returns void (Isaiah 55:11). Thus, we can seek to know and follow His ways, knowing that His ways are for our best, and all others lead to our own destruction.

Biblical Text

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the perishing, seek the scattered, heal the broken, or sustain the one standing, but will devour the flesh of the fat *sheep* and tear off their hoofs.

17 “Woe to the worthless shepherd

Who leaves the flock!

A sword will be on his arm

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