

# Zechariah 11:4-6

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*The LORD commanded Zechariah to care for His covenant people because, like sheep destined for slaughter, they are at the mercy of dishonest merchants and shepherds. The LORD will punish the people, causing strife within the community.*

In the previous section, the prophet Zechariah graphically depicted the upcoming defeat of Lebanon and Bashan, two neighboring regions to the north and east of Israel. These two nations might be indicative of all the nations that would fall under God's judgment for opposing Him and His ways of love-your-neighbor rather than exploit-your-neighbor (vv. 1–3). In the present section, Zechariah explained a message he received from God. He introduced it with the formula, *Thus says the LORD my God* (v. 4).

The Hebrew term translated as *LORD* is Yahweh, the “I Am,” self-existent and everlasting God who revealed Himself to Moses from the burning bush (Exodus 3:14). The name Yahweh speaks of God's character and His relationship with His covenant people. Zechariah, as a child of God, benefited from that intimacy. Thus, after the expression *Thus says the LORD*, he added ‘*my God*,’ thereby stressing his personal experience with Yahweh.

In prophetic literature, Yahweh often revealed His will to some individuals who, in turn, were to relay the divine message to others. Those individuals were responsible to faithfully proclaim God's Word to their audience (Hosea 1:1; Joel 1:1; Micah 1:1; Zephaniah 1:1). For this reason, they often introduced the divine message with the prophetic expression, *Thus says the LORD*, or a similar statement to tell their audience that the revelation did not originate from them. Rather, it came directly from the *LORD* (Yahweh), the one true God who is all-powerful.

After the prophetic formula, the divine message begins. The LORD commanded the prophet to act as a shepherd, urging him to *pasture the flock doomed to slaughter* (v 4). For a shepherd to *pasture* means to feed, guide, and defend the sheep since they are some of the least intelligent of livestock. They are also weak, not having the capacity to fight for themselves in times of danger.

Here Zechariah is tasked to act as a shepherd toward Judah, which is represented as a *flock*. Thus, the LORD used this imagery to tell Zechariah that he was to lead the Judeans. This figurative language also occurs in Isaiah 40:11; Ezekiel 34:8; Micah 5:4.

The prophet Zechariah was to *pasture the flock* intended for *slaughter*. Zechariah compared the Judeans to sheep fattened for butchering.

The Hebrew people were like sheep destined to be consumed by others, *those who buy them slay them* (v. 5). The picture of someone buying the sheep indicates that the people are being viewed as a mere commodity.

God instructed Zechariah to lead the people wisely and provide sound guidance for them. The surrounding peoples as well as Israel's leaders intended to exploit the Judeans, like sheep

butchered for meat. But God desired their care and protection. He appoints Zechariah to shepherd Judah as a *flock*.

A good shepherd cares for and protects the flock. Jesus, Israel's Messiah, described Himself as "The Good Shepherd" (John 10:11, 14). Zechariah will shepherd the people well, however, he will only shepherd them for a brief time. This could foreshadow Jesus, the "Good Shepherd" shepherding Israel for a short time, prior to being rejected during His first advent to earth.

It could be that the flock of Judah preferred to follow corrupt leaders. Good leaders tell people the truth, and offer correction (Hebrews 12:6). People often prefer to be told lies, in the short run. In any event, Zechariah will turn the Judeans over to the corrupt shepherds, who will shepherd them to their doom. This seems to be indicated by the insultingly low sum the people paid Zechariah for his time of leadership (Zechariah 11:13).

Those who would *buy and slay the flock* for their own consumption apparently refers to Israel's bad neighbors (v 1-2) as well as Israel's bad leaders (v 3). It might also refer to exploitative merchants either of Judea or from the looming occupying foreign powers who would exploit Judah, stripping it bare to satisfy their own appetites.

The picture given is of abusive merchants who use the Judeans as they see fit. They would do so for their perceived immediate benefit. Yet, although they ransacked God's people, they would go *unpunished*, meaning that nobody would bring charges against them for such wicked actions. The picture of abusive merchants might be a parable of the bad leaders who prey on their people.

It could also infer collusion between the leaders and the merchants. This was certainly be the case during the time of Jesus, when Jewish leaders conspired with merchants to enrich themselves at the expense of well-intentioned worshippers (Matthew 21:13). This racket was historically referred to as "The Bazaar of the Sons of Annas"—Annas being the patriarch of the ruling priestly family. However, in this passage the responsibility is primarily placed on the leaders.

God often judges by removing His hand of protection and turning rebellious people over to their fleshly desires. This is a pattern that continues throughout scripture. In the New Testament book of Romans, Paul asserts that the wrath of God pours out on the unrighteousness of evil men by giving them over to their own passions (Romans 1:18, 24, 26, 28).

The end result of those who follow the lusts of sin is a loss of mental health (Romans 1:28). We will see that the judgment pronounced on Israel's bad leadership is to lose their good judgement (Zechariah 11:17).

In fact, *each of those* (the merchants/leaders) *who sell them* (the sheep) *says, 'Blessed be the LORD, for I have become rich!'* They have become so callous that they are able to count their exploitation of others as a blessing from God.

The image of exploitation of the Judeans is that of a merchant selling sheep to be slaughtered and eaten. Their greed and selfish ambitions led them to exploit their brothers and sisters to extract benefit for themselves without regard for the welfare of others. The leaders might have conspired

with merchants to exploit others through the use of unjust weights or selling defective merchandise (Leviticus 19:36; Deuteronomy 25:13; Micah 6:11).

In Jesus's day, the sons of Annas apparently created a dedicated currency to be used at the temple, and extracted from their "flock" of temple worshippers through the use of "money changers" (John 2:14). No doubt the exchange rate created a large flow of cash into the priestly pocket. This is probably part of what caused Jesus to refer to the temple as having been turned into a "den of thieves" (Matthew 21:13; 23:14).

The leaders (and perhaps merchants) focused on exploitation. Instead they should have been honest, and cared for their neighbors. They should have sought to establish a self-governing society based on the biblical principle of "love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18). This is what they had agreed to do when they entered into a covenant/treaty with Yahweh, the LORD (Exodus 19:8).

Their testimony concerning their illicit gains—*Blessed be the LORD, for I have become rich*—demonstrated that they experienced no remorse in exploiting their fellow citizens, any more than a merchant of sheep would have guilt for selling a sheep to be slaughtered. They had apparently reached the point of having a "depraved mind" (Romans 1:28). To reach the point where you believe wrong is right so long as it serves self is the end of a progression of self-harm that comes from pursuing sinful behavior (Romans 1:24, 26, 28).

The Judeans suffered because those who were supposed to care for them abused them, exploiting them for their own gain like a merchant selling a fatted sheep. Bad leadership is complicit in the people's abuse, as is apparent from the description *their own shepherds have no pity on them* (v 5). The phrase *their own shepherds* refers to the corrupt Judean leaders.

The verb translated as to *have pity* is "chāmal" in Hebrew. It means to have compassion on someone. It comprises both emotional reaction and active conduct. For instance, in the book of Exodus, the daughter of Pharaoh "took pity" on the child Moses who had been exposed on the Nile and left to die (Exodus 2:6). She spared his life by taking him in and adopting him, even paying his mother to nurse him (Exodus 2:9).

However, here in Zechariah 11, the leaders of the people did nothing to protect them. They apparently felt no guilt or remorse for their actions. They felt completely entitled.

The wickedness of the Judeans and their leaders prompted *the LORD* to pronounce judgment against the guilty parties. The *LORD* declared *I will no longer have pity on the inhabitants of the land* (v. 6). The *inhabitants of the land* refer to the Judeans living in the province of Judah, which at that time was within the Persian empire. God announced that He would not have compassion for them because of their sinful behavior. After the declaration, the prophet Zechariah added the formula *declares the LORD* to add weight to his message and confirm its source.

As judgment for their disobedience, *the LORD* would hand them over to bad leaders and pagan nations. This is consistent with the provisions contained in the covenant/treaty which the Judeans entered into with the LORD (Deuteronomy 28:15-68).

The judgment is introduced with the particle *behold*. The term translated as *behold* is “hinneh” in the Hebrew language. It often describes an event about to take place, an event that is surprising or unexpected for the listeners. It draws attention to the message, preparing the audience to hear it carefully. In our context, the unexpected event of which Zechariah spoke was the judgment to fall upon the Judeans.

God declared, *I will cause the men to fall, each into another's power and into the power of his king* (v 6). God pronounced that Judah would *fall* into the clutches of foreign powers. They will be under the rule of *another's power* who themselves are under the *power of his own king*. God will remove the corrupt Judean leaders and replace them with foreign powers. At this time Judah is under the power of Persia, but with some autonomy. It is inferred that the people will be exiled once again, and spread to the winds. This is in accordance with the provisions included in their covenant/treaty with the LORD (Deuteronomy 28:64).

The pronoun “I” in the phrase *I will cause the men to fall* is emphatic in the Hebrew text, implying that *the LORD* alone has the ultimate power. He is the one who can “put to death and give life” (Deuteronomy 32:39). He is also the One who promised to keep His covenant with Israel, including the provisions of judgment if Israel failed to follow the self-governing ways of loving their neighbors as themselves (Leviticus 19:18).

In Zechariah, God would judge and remove corrupt Judean leaders and place the Judeans under the authority of other leaders, who were under the authority of foreign kings. This infers that the Jews would be scattered throughout the world.

The LORD concluded this section by saying *They will strike the land, and I will not deliver them from their power* (v 6). *They* refers to the foreign powers. Foreign powers will *strike the land* of Judah, and God will not *deliver them from their power*.

The situation described here is dark. The people of God would experience harm because of corrupt leadership. God would remove their corrupt leaders by turning them over to numerous foreign powers, inferring an additional dispersion of the Jews. Then He would not intervene to rescue them from their oppression for a time.

The prophecies in this section appear to fit the circumstances of first century Judea. The Judean leadership had become corrupt. They were outwardly righteous, but completely self-serving. Jesus described them as being those who “devour widows' houses” (Matthew 23:14). These leaders apparently had no sense of guilt from defrauding widows in order to support their own lavish lifestyle. Jesus also described them as being like “like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness” (Matthew 23:27).

We will see in subsequent sections of Chapter 11 a prophecy of Jesus being betrayed for 30 pieces of silver (Zechariah 11:13). Zechariah sarcastically refers to this payment for his service as leader to Judah as a “magnificent price,” as 30 pieces of silver was the price set in the Mosaic law to redeem a servant (Exodus 21:32). This shows how little the people appreciated the opportunity to live under a good and caring shepherd. In the next section, Zechariah will turn over the apathetic people of Judah to be exploited.

This prophecy seems to fit predicting that Jesus would appear as a shepherd to the people of His time, but be undervalued, rejected, and betrayed. In order to get Jesus crucified by the Roman governor Pilate, who had tried and found Jesus innocent, Judah's leaders broke the law and betrayed their position of leadership, even committing blasphemy by declaring that the Roman Caesar was their only king, when God was supposed to be their only king (John 19:15).

This passage is likely a prediction of what transpired after the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in A.D. 70 (Matthew 24:2). After the time of Jerusalem's destruction, the Jews of Judea were scattered among the nations and served many people of many nations (*each into another's power*). That was true of all Jewish people until the twentieth century, when Israel became a nation once again. It is now true of only a part of the Jewish people.

### **Biblical Text**

**4 Thus says the LORD my God, "Pasture the flock *doomed* to slaughter. 5 Those who buy them slay them and go unpunished, and *each of* those who sell them says, 'Blessed be the LORD, for I have become rich!' And their own shepherds have no pity on them. 6 For I will no longer have pity on the inhabitants of the land," declares the LORD; "but behold, I will cause the men to fall, each into another's power and into the power of his king; and they will strike the land, and I will not deliver *them* from their power."**