

Zechariah 11:7-14

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Zechariah cares for the oppressed Judeans using two staffs: one is called Favor and the other Union. He then dismisses the inadequate leaders and renounces his commission to allow the people to receive the fate awaiting them. Finally, he breaks the two staffs, signifying that God will temporarily remove His favor from the people and will not unify Judah and Israel for a while.

In Zechariah 11:4–6, the LORD instructed Zechariah to care for the returning exiles of Judah because, like sheep destined for slaughter, they were at the mercy of exploitative leaders. In the present section, Zechariah obeyed the divine command and reported his courses of action. First, he stated, *I pastured the flock doomed to slaughter* (v. 7). This evokes an image of Zechariah leading Judah like a shepherd would pasture a flock. This particular *flock* is *doomed to slaughter*, meaning it is marked for judgment.

To *pasture* means to protect the *flock* and lead them to places where they can find ample food and drinkable water (Psalm 23:1–3). That is what shepherds do. They usually raised sheep and goats for meat, milk, and skin. The *flock* represents the nation of Judah. Zechariah used the imagery to portray his work as caring for the Judeans destined for destruction. He referred to them as *the afflicted of the flock*. Simply put, the prophet was to lead and guide those Judeans who were destined to suffer humiliation and oppression at the hands of others.

As Zechariah continued the shepherd imagery, he described how he cared for the Judeans: *I took for myself two staffs*. In the ancient world, a shepherd typically carried two sticks. He would have a sturdy rod that served as a weapon to protect the sheep from predatory animals. Then, he would use a long staff to maneuver the sheep when necessary. The prophet told his audience that he had these two items, each with a specific name: *the one I called Favor, and the other I called Union*.

The name *Favor* is “nō‘am” in the Hebrew language. It expresses the idea of favor or kindness. The name *Union* reflects the Hebrew term “ḥōḇelīm.” It means “bond” or “connection.” These names allude to the dual function of the shepherds: to protect the animals against external threats and to keep the herd together. That means that Zechariah would guide the Judeans and care for them in such a way that they would gain God’s approval, keeping the terms of their covenant/treaty with Him, and experience national unity. Thus, he summarized the verse by saying, *So I pastured the flock*.

After taking the lead of God’s people, the prophet removed the negligent leaders within the community of Judah: *I annihilated the three shepherds in one month* (v. 8). The *three shepherds* possibly refer to three classes of rulers in Israel and Judah: kings, priests, and prophets. Zechariah gave the reason for their dismissal: *my soul was impatient with them, and their soul also was weary of me* (v 8).

It seems that all three groups of leaders were unwilling to follow the Lord, and the Lord was out of patience dealing with them. So God moved into a phase of judgment.

In the previous section, we saw an image of the leaders as merchants who exploited others out of greed and selfish ambitions, without any remorse. They attributed their illicit gains to God, declaring that God had made them rich, without a thought of caring for their fellow citizens.

They had thus forsaken the core governing principle of their covenant with God, to love their neighbor as themselves and seek to perpetuate Israel as a self-governing society (Leviticus 19:18). They had apparently become so calloused to God's commands that it did not occur to them that God would never bless them for exploiting others.

Worse yet, the leaders did nothing to protect or care for the people (Zechariah 11:4–6). Therefore, the LORD raised Zechariah to a position of leadership and urged him to act as a good shepherd. In elevating Zechariah, it seems he is taking the place of the kings, priests, and prophets.

This would indicate that, in this respect, Zechariah is a prophetic image of Jesus. Jesus came to earth as a human. Because of His faithful obedience, He was given Sonship over the earth (Hebrews 1:5, 8, 13). This gave Him authority over heaven and earth, with superiority over all earthly kings (Matthew 28:18).

In addition to ascending to Sonship, Jesus also ascended as a priest above all priests, according to the order of Melchizedek (Hebrews 5:5-6). He is therefore the High King as well as the High Priest.

Jesus was also the second Moses. He was the fulfillment of God's promise to send an additional prophet to speak His words directly to the people (Deuteronomy 18:18). Jesus wrote the law on the human heart rather than a tablet of stone.

As we will soon see, Zechariah will step down from shepherding God's people, and they will have little care. Similarly, in spite of His high station, Israel rejected Jesus as their ruler during His first advent. Jesus is over all kings, priests, and prophets.

In obedience to God's command, the prophet Zechariah led the Judeans, apparently rising above all three categories of leaders for a time (kings, priests, and prophets). He removed the false leaders from their offices because of their wickedness.

Having dismissed the incompetent leaders, Zechariah *said* to them, *I will not pasture you* (v. 9). The pronoun *you* is masculine plural. Zechariah had already dismissed the leaders. So this seems to refer to the people of Judah.

Apparently the people refused to follow Zechariah as their shepherd or leader. They were now relegated to judgment. The prophet told the people that he would no longer look after them. He relegated the *flock* to defeat, and commented: *What is to die, let it die, and what is to be annihilated, let it be annihilated* (v 9). The people were now without a protector. They did not want a shepherd, so they will be exposed to predators.

This might look forward to the first century, when God removed His protection from His people after the end of the first generation of those who rejected Jesus as being their king, priest, and

prophet. In 70 AD, Jerusalem was destroyed and many Jews died. In the years that followed, the Jews were spread to the ends of the earth.

Zechariah also informed the leaders that he would not care for those who remained alive: *Let those who are left eat one another's flesh* (v 9). This image of people consuming human flesh usually refers to people enduring a siege, where supplies run short and there is nothing left to eat. In such dire circumstances, people sometimes resort to eating the flesh of humans. This could prophetically predict the Roman siege of Jerusalem in 70 AD.

God left the people to (literally and figuratively) consume each other during internal civil strife. He suddenly renounced his commission as a shepherd, leaving the people to the fate awaiting them (Deuteronomy 31:17).

Moreover, speaking on behalf of the LORD, the prophet Zechariah stated, *I took my staff Favor and cut it in pieces, to break my covenant which I had made with all the peoples* (v. 10). The term translated as *covenant* is “berith” in Hebrew. It refers to a bond and implies the notion of imposition or obligation (Psalm 111:9; Zechariah 9:11). The phrase *all the peoples* refers to all the people of Judah, based on context.

Thus, the snapping of the *staff Favor* symbolized the breaking of the agreement between the Suzerain (Ruler) God and His chosen people. So, *it was broken on that day* (v. 11). Through this symbolic act, the LORD removed His favor from the chosen people.

God entered into a covenant with Israel (Exodus 19:7-8). The agreement followed the format of what historians call a suzerain-vassal treaty, where God was the superior king (Suzerain) and the people the inferior rulers (vassals). The agreement specified blessings for obedience (Deuteronomy 28:1-14) and cursings for violating or breaking the treaty (Deuteronomy 28:15-68).

The people had broken their contract, so it was now time where God would invoke the provision for cursings, as per the terms of the agreement. The phrase *to break my covenant* likely means that God is no longer going to bless Israel, as He promised to do if they walked in obedience to His ways of self-governance and loving their neighbor (Deuteronomy 28:1-14). He will now break off blessing and begin to invoke the cursing provisions. Scripture makes clear that God did not withdraw from the agreement, or cease intending to honor His promises to Israel. This is asserted overtly in the New Testament. Speaking of Israel, who had largely rejected Jesus as their Messiah, the Apostle Paul asserts:

“From the standpoint of the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but from the standpoint of God’s choice they are beloved for the sake of the fathers; for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.”
(Romans 11:28-29)

The act of breaking the *staff Favor* did not go unnoticed. Some witnessed Zechariah breaking it into pieces. Perhaps his action surprised his audience, and some may have wondered why he did it. Among those who observed him, he mentioned the group that listened to his message and learned the lesson.

He went on, *So it was broken on that day, and thus the afflicted of the flock who were watching me realized that it was the word of the LORD* (v 11). It appears the people realized that their covenant with God had been broken. It seems the *afflicted of the flock* are the only ones who *were watching Zechariah*. Perhaps they were the ones being abused, and hoping for deliverance. But they now *realized* that *the word of the LORD* was that additional judgment would be heaped upon Judah.

This would imply that the rest of the people were oblivious, or didn't care what Zechariah (and therefore the LORD) had to say. This will be reinforced when Zechariah asks for wages for his service leading Judah, and is given the insultingly low price of a servant.

When the people of Israel first entered the land under Moses's leadership, God had half of the people gather on Mount Ebal, the mountain of cursings, in order to drive home the reality that any violation of their covenant with God would have real consequences (Deuteronomy 27:13; Joshua 8:33-34). If Israel was to fall into the pagan ways of exploitation and violence, God would remove them from their land (Deuteronomy 28:41, 64). Now the time for those provisions to be enforced had come. It is likely there was a near-term fulfillment. The later-term fulfillment probably occurred after Jesus was rejected by His people to be their leader, even as Zechariah will be rejected.

The Hebrew term for *word* in the phrase *the word of the LORD* is "dābhār." It is the same word used for "thing, event, or matter" (Proverbs 11:13, 17:9; 1 Kings 14:19). In the Bible, the term often deals with a situation or an event, as the prophets Amos and Isaiah make clear (Amos 1:1; Isaiah 2:1). It can be a message of judgment or a *word* of hope and salvation. It is authoritative and requires actions from its recipient(s) because it came from *the LORD*.

The Hebrew term for *LORD* in the phrase *the word of the LORD* is "Yahweh," the covenant name of God. That name speaks of God's character and His relationship with His covenant people (Exodus 3:14, 34:6). In our passage, the prophet told his audience that his action was the *word of the LORD*. That means that the divine *word* was more than a mere speech. It was a medium of God's activity as promises, exhortation, and creative power. In this passage, *the afflicted of the flock*, the oppressed citizens of the Judean community, realized that *the LORD* had spoken to them through the prophet's actions.

Zechariah then spoke to the Judeans and *said, If it is good in your sight, give me my wages* (v. 12). He asked the people to pay him for his time of service as their leader, a position from which he was now resigning. But Zechariah put no constraint on what they might pay. He left it to them to decide. If they thought it was appropriate to give him his *wages* to show their gratitude for all the care bestowed on them, they could do so. *But if not, never mind!* It was their choice.

Jewish tradition holds that this proposition by Zechariah was presented to the leaders of Judah. The leaders of Judah decided to reward Zechariah, but in a manner that appears intended as a slight. He spelled out the fees given to him and declared, *So, they weighed out thirty shekels of silver as my wages* (v 12). In the Israelite culture, *thirty shekels of silver* was the price of a slave. It was the price paid to the master of a male or female slave when an ox gored him or her (Exodus 21:32).

Thus, the people insulted Zechariah by offering him the price of a slave for his work in leading them. The Gospel of Matthew alludes to this verse, indicating that Jesus' betrayal by Judas, who conspired with the leaders of Judah, fulfilled this prophecy:

“Then one of the twelve, named Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, ‘What are you willing to give me to betray Him to you?’ And they weighed out thirty pieces of silver to him.”

(Matthew 26:15)

Since Zechariah's salary was an insult, *the LORD* advised him to *throw it to the potter* (v. 13). The pronoun “it” refers to the silver pieces. The term *potter* (“yōtsēr” in Hebrew) describes a person who crafts pots (2 Samuel 17:28). His job was to knead the clay with his feet and then shape the vessel on a potter's wheel (see Isaiah 41:25 and Jeremiah 18:5–6).

In Zechariah, the prophet told his audience that he was supposed to donate the silver to the *potter*. Using sarcasm he described his wages as *that magnificent price at which I was valued by them* (v 13). Zechariah used sarcasm to draw attention to the insultingly low value of the silver pieces paid to him, calling the price of a slave a *magnificent price*.

The point is that Zechariah's excellent leadership was given no value by Judah's leaders. The same will be true of Judah's leaders in the time of Jesus. Jesus will perform miracles, bringing healing to the ill and sight to the blind. He will feed the hungry. He will teach the truth. But the leaders of Judah will only care about maintaining their position of privilege (John 11:48). They will betray Jesus for thirty pieces of silver and betray their true king, God, in order to have Jesus crucified. They will do this by declaring to the Roman governor Pilate that they have no king but Caesar (John 19:15).

That *the LORD* commanded Zechariah to give his *wages to the potter* shows that He was unhappy with the people's appraisal of the prophet. He told His messenger to act as a shepherd to lead, guide, and protect the Judeans. Unfortunately, they did not recognize the importance of the man of God, whose task was to lead them in all righteousness. Therefore, they paid him an insulting price for his work—the price of a slave.

Zechariah gave his *wages to the potter*, as the LORD had commanded. So, he said, *I took the thirty shekels of silver and threw them to the potter in the house of the LORD* (v 13). The *house of the LORD* refers to the temple in Jerusalem. When the exiles had returned to Israel from being exiled to Babylon they built a second temple. The Babylonians had destroyed the first temple when they captured Jerusalem in 586 BC, causing the Judeans to spend about 70 years in exile in Babylonia.

In Zechariah's day, the Judeans had already laid the new temple foundation (Ezra 5:1, 6:14). Since the temple was the place where the Israelites/Judeans stored tithes and other precious items dedicated to Yahweh, the prophet gave the *silver pieces to the potter* so he could save them there (Joshua 6:24; Ezra 2:69).

Matthew picks up on the fact that Zechariah *threw* the pieces of silver *to the potter in the house of the Lord* when he reports a significant detail regarding Judas's betrayal of Jesus. After noting

that the Jewish leaders would not take back the payment because it was the price of blood, Mathew reports:

And he [Judas] threw the pieces of silver into the temple sanctuary and departed.”
(Matthew 27:5a)

Judas then went and hanged himself. The Jewish leaders decided to use the money to buy a field, which they turned into a graveyard for strangers. Matthew, again noting the details in Zechariah’s prophecy, points out that the field purchased with the thirty pieces of silver was called the “Potter’s Field”:

“And they conferred together and with the money bought the Potter’s Field as a burial place for strangers.”
(Matthew 27:7)

Jesus was offered to Israel as a superior prophet, priest, and king. But He was rejected. He was the King of the Jews. But He was betrayed for the price of a slave. Thus Zechariah’s prophecy was fulfilled in great detail.

Having donated the *silver to the potter*, Zechariah told his audience the next task he undertook: *Then I cut in pieces my second staff Union*. This *staff* apparently symbolized the national unity between the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. Thus, the prophet *cut it to break the brotherhood between Judah and Israel* (v 14).

The northern tribes known as *Israel* or Samaria broke away from Judah and the tribes it had absorbed after Solomon’s son Rehoboam declared that he would increase taxation (1 Kings 12:16). The northern kingdom ceased to exist when the Assyrians invaded it in 722 BC (2 Kings 17). The northern kingdom was exiled and had not returned at the time of Zechariah. However, Zechariah’s prophecy began in 520 BC, some 200 years later. So, why did he speak about the *brotherhood between Judah and Israel* when *Israel* was no more?

The prophet used both the terms Israel and Judah to refer to whole of the Jewish nation. His point is that the Jewish people would not enjoy reunification for some time. It indicates that rather than the northern tribes returning to unite with Judah—to reunite all twelve tribes of Israel—the southern kingdom of Judah was also heading into exile, for a second time.

This prophecy of disunity may foreshadow the discord that existed within the nation, causing Israel to be ruled by Rome, that was later on a major cause of Jerusalem being destroyed by Rome in 70 AD. Thus Zechariah’s prophecy indicates that all of Israel will be exiled for a time, as prescribed in their covenant with Yahweh, the LORD, if they disobeyed God’s commands to love rather than exploit one another (Deuteronomy 28:64).

Although the two nations did not achieve unity in the days of Zechariah, and have spent many centuries in exile since then, the LORD promised to gather and reunify them at the appropriate moment. At that time, “they will appoint for themselves one leader” (Hosea 1:11b). Indeed, God “will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel; and one king will be king for all of them, and they will no longer be two nations and no longer be divided into two kingdoms” (Ezekiel 37:22).

It is likely that the events described in this chapter had literal fulfillments during Zechariah's day. But it is certain that this passage is a messianic prophecy. From a messianic standpoint, the snapping of the staff *Favor* might symbolize Israel's rejection of Jesus as their God and king. The breaking of the staff *Union* probably represents the bloody victory of the Romans over Jerusalem in A.D. 70, which triggered a subsequent exile of Jews from their land for a second time.

The three shepherds that Zechariah displaced (v 8) might represent the three offices of leadership in Jesus's day: the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Scribes (Matthew 16:21, 26:3–5). Jesus was presented to Israel as God's lasting answer to all three biblical offices: prophet, priest, and king. But the leaders refused to recognize Him.

Lastly, Zechariah's throwing of *thirty shekels of silver* into the house of the Lord prefigures Judas's action when he returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests (Matthew 27:3–4). It is typical for biblical prophecies to have a dual fulfillment. In this case, we are told by Zechariah of the immediate fulfillment, which presumably had the practical impact of providing a donation to help with the rebuilding of the temple. It had a second fulfillment when Judas threw the thirty pieces of silver into the temple (Matthew 27:5).

The remarkable fulfillment of messianic prophecies underscores God's sovereignty. Scripture indicates what Jesus came to earth determined to do:

“THEN I SAID, ‘BEHOLD, I HAVE COME
(IN THE SCROLL OF THE BOOK IT IS WRITTEN OF ME)
TO DO YOUR WILL, O GOD.’”
(Hebrews 10:7)

This passage from Hebrews is attributed to words spoken by Jesus when He entered the world. It is itself a quote of Psalm 40:7-8, again showing the remarkable dependability of God's word.

Biblical Text

7 So I pastured the flock *doomed* to slaughter, hence the afflicted of the flock. And I took for myself two staffs: the one I called Favor and the other I called Union; so I pastured the flock. 8 Then I annihilated the three shepherds in one month, for my soul was impatient with them, and their soul also was weary of me. 9 Then I said, “I will not pasture you. What is to die, let it die, and what is to be annihilated, let it be annihilated; and let those who are left eat one another's flesh.” 10 I took my staff Favor and cut it in pieces, to break my covenant which I had made with all the peoples. 11 So it was broken on that day, and thus the afflicted of the flock who were watching me realized that it was the word of the LORD. 12 I said to them, “If it is good in your sight, give *me* my wages; but if not, never mind!” So they weighed out thirty *shekels* of silver as my wages. 13 Then the LORD said to me, “Throw it to the potter, *that* magnificent price at which I was valued by them.” So I took the thirty *shekels* of silver and threw them to the potter in the house of the LORD. 14 Then I cut in pieces my second staff Union, to break the brotherhood between Judah and Israel.