

## **Bad Shepherds and Bad Sheep** **Zechariah 11:1-17**

How does democracy cope with the issue of greed? Can it cope with it? The issue became fairly clear in the last federal election.

- John Howard made a promise.
- Kevin Rudd topped it.
- John Howard upped his promise.
- Kevin Rudd trumped it.

And so it went on – grandiose promise after grandiose promise – until finally Kevin Rudd called a halt to it. He said: we don't have unlimited money. There is a point where spending becomes irresponsible. I'm not going any further. The reality was he should have said it about ten promises before he did.

It's all an appeal to greed. Elect me. I'll give you more for less. I've got a magic wand that'll turn your hard-earned tax dollars into more tax cuts for you. And when we face an economic meltdown, who's to blame?

- The leaders who promised to satisfy our greed; or
- The people who clamoured to have their greed met?

Is our major problem simply that we've got a bad crop of leaders? Or is the real problem that we've got a bad crop of sheep – that we've demanded leaders who'll pander to our self-centred greed and that's exactly what we've got?

### **The Background of Ezekiel**

Earlier we read Ezekiel 34. The book of Ezekiel begins by explaining the reason for the exile – namely, that it's God's just judgment on His people's sin. The exile's not an accident of history. It's not an indication that God's lost or that other more powerful gods exist. It's not an

indication that these other nations are now too big for God to control. The exile happens because God's people sinned and refused to turn away from their sin. Therefore God judged them.

That raised several related questions for God's people.

- Would they never occupy the land again?
- Had God permanently left Jerusalem?
- Was the *forever* line of Davidic kings finished?
- Had God brought the covenant to an end?

Ezekiel emphatically says: God hasn't cast them aside forever. God hasn't given up on them completely. God had sufficient reason to leave them on the scrap-heap – but He wouldn't. He'd still work to achieve His purposes – purposes He promised back in the Garden; purposes He promised to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob; purposes He promised to King David. Israel had failed miserably – as God knew they would – but His purposes had not failed.

It's into that context that Ezekiel 34 comes. The chapter breaks up into four main sections.

- It begins with God's judgment against the current shepherds (1-10). They were too busy looking after themselves to care properly for the flock. God would remove these shepherds and rescue the flock.
- Then God says that He Himself will shepherd the flock (11-16). God will search for the sheep. God will bring them together into one flock. God will care for them. God will pasture them on the mountains of Israel.
- In the third section, God speaks of a judgment on the sheep themselves (17-22). The problem wasn't simply one of bad shepherds. The way the flock treated one another was also wrong. The stronger

sheep took advantage of the weaker sheep.

- The final section looks to the new order (23-31). God will appoint a new shepherd – My servant David. The flock will live in peace and prosperity.

It's a picture of a great future.

Now, turn over to Ezekiel 37. The first half of the chapter's fairly well-known. It's where Ezekiel's told to prophesy to a valley of dry bones. As a result, the bones come together and flesh appears on the bones and life's restored to the bones. Ezekiel's told that God will resurrect His people and put them back in their own land.

In the second half of the chapter, Ezekiel's told to take two sticks of wood and to write on them.

- On one, he's to write: *Belonging to Judah and the Israelites associated with him.*
- On the other, he's to write: *Ephraim's stick, belonging to Joseph and all the house of Israel associated with him.*

Then he's to bring the two sticks together to symbolise the nation coming back together as one nation. Nearly 400 years before, after King Solomon's death, God's people had split into two nations. Now God says to them – verse 22:

*I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel. There will be one king over all of them and they will never again be two nations or be divided into two kingdoms. They will no longer defile themselves with their idols and vile images or with any of their offences, for I will save them from all their sinful backsliding, and I will cleanse them. They will be My people, and I will be their God. My servant David will be king over them, and they will all have one shep-*

*herd. They will follow My laws and be careful to keep My decrees.*

And so it goes on.

So, what do you think the people expect when they return from exile? My guess is they expected something that looked considerably different from before the exile.

- A unified nation.
- A godly, Davidic king.
- An independent Jewish kingdom.
- A people wanting God's will.
- A peaceful and prosperous lifestyle.

The reality doesn't seem to meet their expectations. Sure, they'd returned to the land. God arranged that. But they seemed such a paltry, insignificant bunch. They had no Davidic king. They had no independent state. They managed to scrape by – but it was hardly what you'd call prosperous. And, while they didn't stoop to some of the evil practices of their ancestors, the quality of their godliness was not particularly overwhelming.

### **Dealing with Bad Shepherds**

And so, we come to Zechariah. Zechariah says the return from exile is more complex than their expectations. God will do great things – Zechariah's full of great promises of what God'll do. But the issue of bad shepherds isn't finished yet. We saw that last week in 10:3

*"My anger burns against the shepherds,  
and I will punish the leaders;  
for the Lord Almighty will care  
for His flock, the house of Judah,*

It's picked up again in 11:1

*Open your doors, O Lebanon,  
 so that fire may devour your cedars!  
 Wail, O pine tree, for the cedar has fallen;  
 the stately trees are ruined!  
 Wail, oaks of Bashan;  
 the dense forest has been cut down!  
 Listen to the wail of the shepherds;  
 their rich pastures are destroyed!  
 Listen to the roar of the lions;  
 the lush thicket of the Jordan is ruined!*

These stately trees are pictures of leadership. That's made clear in verse 3 – where Zechariah reverts to the picture of the shepherd. It's the leaders who are wailing. Why? Fire's an image of judgment. So is the axe. They wail because God's judgment comes on them. They're punished for their self-serving leadership. They're punished for their failure to truly shepherd the people.

So the exile's happened. The people return to their land. They resume life in God's place. They look forward to God fulfilling His promises. But they still face the issue of bad shepherds. It seems so unexpected. Surely that stuff's in the past now. Wasn't that dealt with in the exile? Aren't they now beyond the exile? Haven't they entered the new age of God's glorious kingdom?

But the exile hasn't really changed anything – not at the fundamental level. Sure, they learnt they weren't immune from God's judgment. They learnt God's patience with them wasn't unending. They learnt that sin mattered. But there was no real inner change. They still had leaders with rebellious natures. And so there'd still be leaders who'd shepherd for their own ends. They'd look after

themselves rather than the flock. They'd worry about providing for their own needs rather than caring for the needs of the flock.

More than that – they themselves still had rebellious natures. The problem's not simply external – we've got bad leadership and that's why we go off the rails. The problem's internal – we have this tendency to go off the rails and that's why we're such a hard flock to shepherd.

### **The Good Shepherd**

To drive home this fundamental problem, Zechariah's given an enacted parable. Verse 4:

*This is what the Lord my God says: "Pasture the flock marked for slaughter. Their buyers slaughter them and go unpunished. Those who sell them say, 'Praise the Lord, I am rich!' Their own shepherds do not spare them. For I will no longer have pity on the people of the land," declares the Lord. "I will hand everyone over to his neighbour and his king. They will oppress the land, and I will not rescue them from their hands."*

*So I pastured the flock marked for slaughter, particularly the oppressed of the flock. Then I took two staffs and called one Favour and the other Union, and I pastured the flock. In one month I got rid of the three shepherds.*

At the outset it's stated: this flock's marked for slaughter. This flock's doomed. It's not simply that the shepherds will be judged for being such bad shepherds. The sheep themselves are marked for slaughter.

Now, their initial shepherds are bad. They're self-serving.

They use the flock for their own ends. They even go as far as to praise God for the riches they accumulate at the expense of the flock. They're not interested in reporting to God about how they've been responsible for His flock. Their judgment's already been pronounced. God will act against those shepherds.

But, it seems, the flock's to be given one last chance. Zechariah's told to look after this flock. And so he does. He particularly looks after the weak members of the flock – the ones who are oppressed and struggling. He does a good job.

He has two staffs – but they're a bit different to the sticks in Ezekiel. One of them's called Union. It's like Ezekiel – where the two sticks are brought together to represent the one nation. The other one's called Favour or Grace or Pleasant. These two staffs are instruments the good shepherds of God's people should have. These are the principles of the shepherd's leadership of the flock.

- The first represents the covenant of Yahweh with Israel. Yahweh graciously rescued them from slavery in Egypt. Yahweh graciously gave them His laws – His directions for how to live as His people. Yahweh graciously gave them the land promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Yahweh wanted to do good to them.
- The second represents the union of the twelve tribes. It was the bringing back together of the northern and southern kingdoms. It was the unity of people under the proper rule of God.

And Zechariah makes progress. He gets rid of the bad shepherds – three in one month. There are all sorts of

guesses as to who these three are – some guy back in the early 1900s identified 40 different suggestions that had been made then. I suspect others have added to the list since then. I don't think it matters. The point is: he made progress. It was out with the bad and in with the good.

### The Bad Flock

But it still didn't work. The second half of verse 8:

*The flock detested me, and I grew weary of them and said, "I will not be your shepherd. Let the dying die, and the perishing perish. Let those who are left eat one another's flesh."*

The flock rejected the good shepherd.

We're very good at looking for scapegoats. We can always find someone or something else to blame.

- It's the way I was brought up.
- It's how I was treated at school.
- It's the traumatic experience I had as a teenager.
- It's because I had too many pimples.
- It's because I don't have enough money.
- It's because I've got too much money.

These people are given a good shepherd – they're given good leadership – and they reject it. They don't want it. They can't blame him.

So this shepherd gives up. Verse 10:

*Then I took my staff called Favour and broke it, revoking the covenant I had made with all the nations. It was revoked on that day, and so the afflicted of the flock who were watching me knew it was the word of the Lord.*

*I told them, "If you think it best, give me my pay; but if not, keep it." So they paid me thirty pieces of silver.*

*And the Lord said to me, "Throw it to the potter" – the handsome price at which they priced me! So I took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them into the house of the Lord to the potter.*

*Then I broke my second staff called Union, breaking the brotherhood between Judah and Israel.*

The shepherd breaks the symbols of his leadership – the two staffs. He asks for the pay for his work – for the service he performed in looking after the flock. He's given 30 pieces of silver. Under the law, that was the price of a slave's life – when a slave was killed by a bull. Here it's considered an insult – a trifling amount for the work that was done in rightfully shepherding God's flock according to God's standards.

The result is the flock must bear the consequences of their foolishness. They're given back to foolish shepherds – for them to look after the flock. If they won't put up with a good shepherd, then let them have what they want. Verse 15:

*Then the Lord said to me, "Take again the equipment of a foolish shepherd. For I am going to raise up a shepherd over the land who will not care for the lost, or seek the young, or heal the injured, or feed the healthy, but will eat the meat of the choice sheep, tearing off their hoofs.*

*"Woe to the worthless shepherd,  
who deserts the flock!*

*May the sword strike his arm and his right eye  
May his arm be completely withered,  
his right eye totally blinded!"*

## **The Interpretation**

That's the enacted parable. What are we to make of it? At one level, it's quite easy to understand.

There's a doomed flock with bad shepherds. The flock are given one last chance. They're given a good shepherd. The flock decides it doesn't like the good shepherd and so rejects him. So the flock's given what they want – a foolish shepherd.

That all seems fairly simple. Not much difficulty there.

But how's that fit into Zechariah's historical situation? Israel's returned from exile. They're under the leadership of Zerubbabel the governor and Joshua the high priest. Now, these guys aren't perfect – but, from what we've read of them so far in Zechariah, they seem to be doing a fairly good job. They don't seem to fall into the category of bad shepherds fleecing the flock for their own gain. So why do we have this story as this stage of Israel's history?

Some think it looks backward. They say this is a re-telling of Israel's history leading up to the exile. Both the northern and southern nations suffered at the hands of bad kings – kings more interested in looking after themselves than caring for God's people. Occasionally, a good king came along, but it made no lasting impact on the flock. They rejected God as their shepherd and anyone that'd move them towards God. So God handed them over to foolish shepherds – the Assyrians and the Babylonians.

Some think it looks forward to a time not yet arrived. They look through the passage and try to identify what they read with what's already happened in history and find they can't. So, they conclude it's still future.

Some think it's a warning for the present. Zerubbabel and Joshua are providing good leadership – together they're the good shepherd that Zechariah enacts. The people are being warned not to reject their leadership. If they do, they'll be handed back to the sort of foolish leaders that resulted in the exile.

When Zechariah had his eight night visions, he had an interpreting angel to tell him what they meant. It'd have been nice if he'd hung around a little longer – so he could tell us what this is all about.

However, there's another part of the Bible that refers to parts of this passage. In Matthew 26 we're told Judas betrays Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. In Matthew 27, we're told Judas returns the money to the chief priests and elders – that he throws it into the temple and leaves. They use the money to buy the potter's field and use it as a burial place for foreigners. Matthew 27:9

*Then what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled: "They took the thirty silver coins, the price set on Him by the people of Israel, and they used them to buy the potter's field, as the Lord commanded me".*

Matthew says that what Judas did fits with what the prophets said. He refers to Jeremiah because he's the one who talks about potters and buying a field – in Jeremiah 18 and 19 and 32. But the 30 pieces of silver are not from Jeremiah, but from Zechariah.

What are we to learn?

- In Jeremiah 19, the prophet's told to buy a clay jar and take some elders and priests and go to the Valley of Ben Hinnom. There Jeremiah announces:

"Because Israel has left Yahweh and made the land a place of foreign gods, she will be judged". He's to smash the clay jar as a symbol of what will happen to the nation and the city.

- In Zechariah 11, the prophet's paid off with the price of a slave to stop leading the people. They reject the good shepherd – the shepherd wanting to keep the flock loyal to Yahweh. They're given the result of that rejection – they're handed over to foolish shepherds.
- The parallel in Matthew 27 is not exact. The money's given to Judas, rather than the Good Shepherd. Yet the parallel remains. In Zechariah and Matthew, God's shepherd is rejected by the flock. In Zechariah and Matthew, the good shepherd is valued at the price of a slave. In Zechariah and Matthew, judgment follows.

Ezekiel 34 tells us God will establish His Davidic King over His people. God hasn't given up on His promises. He's still working towards bringing them about. Zechariah tells us the way they come about is more complex than we may expect. The Davidic king will come. The Good Shepherd will come. But when He comes, He won't be wanted. He'll be rejected. Zechariah gives us still more of the puzzle in the next oracle – he's got still more to tell us about the shepherd – and so I don't want to get too far ahead of this chapter. There are more pieces to put together.

Yet, what do we see from the way Jesus fulfils this prophecy? Let me suggest two things. **First**, the real problem's with the flock. It's not simply an issue of bad leadership – it's an issue of bad followers. Even when

you've got a good shepherd, the flock reject him. They don't want to go God's way. In Jesus, we have the perfect shepherd. He Himself claims to be the Good Shepherd in John 10. He comes as the Davidic King – as God's King. But what do the flock do with Him.

- Judas sells Him for 30 pieces of silver.
- The mob cry: "Crucify Him".

They hang Him on a cross to die. That's what they think of God's King who comes in peace – riding on a donkey. That's what they think of godly leadership.

So there's a challenge there to us as sheep. It comes at two levels.

- In the church, make sure you follow good shepherds. The issue isn't charismatic personality or entertainment value or having a good time. The issue is shepherds who'll feed you the truth of God's word and lead you in godliness. As a sheep, it's important you make that your priority. It's pretty bad at the political level when it's the sinful desires of the sheep that drive the agenda. It's far more disastrous when that happens in the church.
- And ultimately, make sure you follow the Good Shepherd – and follow Him truly. Stupid sheep pick and choose. They pick out the nice bits Jesus says to them – they're very happy to follow at that point. But they turn a deaf ear when Jesus challenges them about forgiving others or getting more involved in kingdom work or the way they indulge themselves. That's foolish. The Good Shepherd desires what's best for you. Trust what He says.

**Secondly**, following the rejection of the Good Shepherd, there's judgment. But here's where there's a real twist.

For, with Jesus, the judgment falls on the Shepherd rather than the sheep. He's the One who's hung up on a cross under God's judgment. He's the One who bears God's curse on human wickedness. He's the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep.

Instead of giving up on the flock – instead of abandoning the flock as they very well deserve – He continues to care for them. He goes a step further than Zechariah. Let's be clear about this. This flock deserved only judgment.

- They'd rejected God.
- They'd rejected God's shepherd.
- They attacked one another.
- They were wicked through and through.

There was nothing in them that was worth saving. Even when given a last chance, they rejected it. They deserved judgment. We deserve judgment.

But God's love's so amazing. Even then He didn't give up on us. Jesus died for our wickedness. He was judged in our place. He continues to offer to be our Shepherd – which leaves us with a choice:

- We can take up the offer and submit to Him as our Shepherd – our King.
- Or we can continue to reject God and His rule and face God's judgment.