

The Rejected Shepherd

Zechariah 11

It was a day of rejoicing. As the crowd gathered to welcome Jesus into Jerusalem, they had the highest of expectations. All of them had heard about His amazing miracles, and doubtless many of them had experienced them firsthand. And their prophets had told them to expect such a Messiah. In chapter 9, Isaiah had said that a Child would be born to them to govern them, who would break the rod of their oppressors. Isaiah said, "Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end. Upon the throne of David and over His kingdom, to order it and establish it with judgment and justice from that time forward, even forever." Surely, the crowd understood that Jesus was the One Isaiah had told them to expect!

And so they hailed him as their king, and they cried out to Him for salvation from the hated Romans who taxed them and humiliated them in the process. But as Jesus rode into Jerusalem not on a powerful warhorse but on a donkey's colt, He was making it quite clear that He would not live up to their expectations, at least not in the way that everyone thought He would.

For in the way that He entered the city, He was trying to draw their attention to another prophecy – that of Zechariah, one of the prophets who had spoken to the people of God at the time the Temple was rebuilt after their return from exile in Babylon. Yes, in chapter 9, Zechariah had spoken of their Messiah Who would come to His people, a King Whose dominion would be from sea to sea, and from the Euphrates River to the ends of the earth. Zechariah had told the people that this great King would be so powerful that horses and chariots, the weapons of war would no longer be needed, for He would bring peace to all the nations. No wonder Zechariah told God's people to rejoice greatly in anticipation of their coming King, just as they were doing on Palm Sunday.

But Zechariah also said some confusing things about this King, and Jesus acted out one of those things as He made His way into Jerusalem. For in chapter 9, Zechariah had also told God's people, "Behold, your King is coming to you; He is just and having salvation, Lowly and riding on a donkey, A colt, the foal of a donkey."

Now, that didn't make any sense to anyone in the Jerusalem crowd. How could a King Who was powerful enough to bring peace to the nations also be meek and lowly? How could a King lead an army against the hated Romans on a donkey instead of a warhorse?

No, they didn't understand what Jesus was trying to say, and they certainly didn't understand what He was trying to do. They were so focused on the sort of wealth and independence they could gain from this world, they couldn't imagine that the sorts of spiritual blessings Jesus offered to them would be even more important. They just weren't that interested in salvation from their sins. They weren't focused on freedom from sin and death – they just wanted worldly blessings.

So why were the people so clueless? Maybe it was because of the religious leaders, the ones that Zechariah calls "possessors" or "shepherds" in today's passage. He certainly didn't have many good things to say about them. In verse 5, he says that they slay the sheep and sell them, and have no pity on them. In verse 8, he says that he fired three of them in one month because he loathed them.

Zechariah's experience was certainly a foreshadowing of Jesus' relationship with the religious leaders of His day, wasn't it? In fact, one of the things Jesus said about them in Matthew's gospel was that they "shut off the kingdom of heaven from men" while not going in themselves, either. By putting so much emphasis on people's attempts to gain their own righteousness by keeping the Law of Moses, they neglected the essential meaning of the Law – that a sacrifice was necessary for forgiveness of sins, and taught their followers the same thing.

Of course, the religious leaders had no great love for Jesus, either. So they were delighted when Judas Iscariot came to them, offering to betray him for 30 pieces of silver – the same amount in wages that Zechariah received in verse 13 for taking care of the sheep. Zechariah threw that money to the potter in the house of the Lord, just as Judas would return his blood money to the priests in the Temple, who used it to purchase a potter's field.

So, when Jesus drew the people's attention to Zechariah's prophecy by riding that donkey into Jerusalem, He wasn't just testifying to His own humility in the face of earthly kings. He was also making a not-so-subtle reference to the hatred that the religious leaders of His day would have for Him, a hatred that would soon result in His own death. For before the week was finished, the religious leaders would complete their work of turning the crowd against Jesus. When He finally surrendered to Pilate, thus making it clear that He wasn't going to lead a revolt against the Romans, the chief priests convinced the Jerusalem mob to ask for Barabbas the terrorist to be released to them, and for Jesus to be crucified.

Ah, but that means the crowd wasn't without blame either, right? After all, if they preferred Barabbas to Jesus, that means that they were just as worldly, just as focused on material things as their religious leaders were. Once they realized that Jesus wasn't going to lead them in a war of independence from the Romans, once they saw that He wasn't going to keep feeding them with miraculous food from Heaven, once it sank in that the Great Healer wouldn't even stop His own wounds from bleeding, let alone cure all their continuing ailments, they had no use for Him. "Let Him be crucified," the same people would say, the same people that less than a week earlier had hailed Jesus as the Son of David.

And in today's passage from Zechariah, don't we see the sheep sharing the same judgment as their shepherds? In verse 6, the Lord said He wouldn't have any more pity on any of the people who lived in the land. In verse 9, Zechariah said "I will not feed you. What is to die, let it die, and let those who are left eat one another's flesh." Because the crowd was just as worldly, just as greedy as their leaders, they would all share the same doom.

And Zechariah summarized the essence of that doom in the strange things he did with his two shepherd's staffs. One he called "Beauty," which means grace or favor. The other he called "Bonds," which points to union. But in verse 10, he broke the staff of grace and favor, indicating that God would break the covenant He had made with His people. And in verse 14, he destroyed the other staff, indicating that the unity between Judah and Israel would be forever sundered.

That all sounds so harsh, doesn't it? But didn't Jesus prophesy that the same thing would happen to those who rejected Him, to the people and leaders alike? In fact, in Luke's account of Palm Sunday, he says that when Jesus rode into the city, He was crying because He said to the whole city, "The days shall come upon you when your enemies will throw up a siege mound before you and

surround you, and hem you in on every side, and will level you to the ground and your children within you, and they will not leave in you one stone upon another.” And why did He say this? “Because you did not recognize the time of your visitation,” because they didn’t realize Who He was and submit themselves to His authority.

And it all happened just as Jesus said it would. In A.D. 66, a little more than 30 years after the people of Jerusalem crucified Jesus because He wouldn’t lead them in a rebellion against the Romans, they finally got their wish. When a Roman official raided the Temple treasury, the people were so enraged that they seized the Roman fortress in Jerusalem and killed all the soldiers. They had some early successes, and when Nero died in A.D. 68, they hoped that the Romans would be so divided that they could indeed become independent. But when Vespasian unified control of the empire in his hands, the final outcome was inevitable. He sent his son Titus to conquer Jerusalem, and after a siege of five months, the city was conquered and the Temple was destroyed in A.D. 70, just as Jesus had predicted. Most of those who remained in the city were killed, and others were sold as slaves. Truly the staff of Beauty and the staff of Bonds were broken.

That’s all very sad, but what does it mean for us? Well, at the very least, examining these Old Testament prophecies proves Jesus’ mastery of all of human history – for how else could the events of His life fulfill the words of a prophet who had written over 500 years earlier? Riding into town on a donkey, being rejected by his people and their leaders, and being valued at 30 pieces of silver – none of these things were accidental. God had told it all to Zechariah long before any of it took place.

But when we compare those ancient writings to the events of Jesus’ life, we also can’t escape the conclusion that Jesus knew everything that was going to happen to Him. The fact that He acted out one of Zechariah’s prophecies by riding into Jerusalem on a donkey can leave no doubt on that point – Jesus obviously believed He was fulfilling the ancient prophecies of the Messiah. And given what we’ve learned from today’s passage, that also means Jesus knew it was God’s plan that He would be despised and rejected and put to death.

But here’s what is so amazing about that – He obviously knew everything that was going to happen to Him, but He chose to go through it all anyway. He knew the religious leaders would condemn Him. He knew His own people would reject Him. He even knew that Judas would sell Him out for 30 pieces of silver. And yet His love for His people was so great that He was willing to lay down His life for sinners like them – for sinners like us. And He died, not so that we might have worldly wealth or health or freedom, all the things that the Jerusalem crowd wanted, and was so disappointed that Jesus didn’t give them. No, He died so that we might receive the Beauty of God’s grace and favor. He died so that the Bonds of love might be restored, not just between all of God’s people, but between sinful man and God Himself.

So today, maybe you find yourself a bit sympathetic with the Jerusalem crowd. Maybe you’re disappointed in how your life has turned out. Maybe, given some of the pain, the grief, the problems in your life, you’re wondering if God really cares, or if God really can do anything to help you.

If that’s the case, look again at that man, riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, knowing exactly what would happen to Him within a week’s time. How can you doubt His sovereign power over all the events of history? And look again at the sacrifice He made for those who despised and rejected Him, for

sinners like you, for sinners like me. How can you doubt His love? So doesn't it make sense for all of us to surrender our expectations, our very lives to Him?