**Zechariah 11 Foolish Shepherds 22nd September 2022**

The glories of the golden age do not last! The cedars, the oaks, the mighty are spoiled! Nothing substantial lasts, the jealous chopped down the beauty of Lebanon and all that was left were the inglorious fir trees, which were to bemoan the collapse of a once rich and abundant society. The vintage was to be no more, the blessings of the Eternal had been taken for granted and had been squandered by the ignorant. Trees do not literally howl, and it is understood that the language employed by the Spirit requires a symbolic interpretation of the details portrayed.

The collapse of a once great society is inevitable because of human nature. If a civilisation grows to new heights because of the size of its armies, the privilege of its geography, the skill of its artisans or the scheming of its politicians, hubris will bring it down. The next generation will discount that they need to work hard to maintain the successes of the past and take them for granted, pride will afflict a people to believe that they can do whatever they want, whenever they want, remaining distinct and distant from the Creator God. Lebanon, Israel, Judah and Jordan all imploded into self-serving corruption, it started spiritually then morally then economically then it ended physically with disease famine and oppression.

Those that remained inflated in their own opinions felt at first that they were different, even blessed by God because they had an advantage over others only latterly waking up to the reality of the situation that their elevated position made them even more vulnerable than the poor folk they had continued to afflict.

It is the way of Truth, seen in simple cause and effect that overtakes everything eventually. Until then deceit fills and blinds the minds of so many. "*Feed the flock of the slaughter whose possessors slay them and hold themselves not guilty*". Israel was being slaughtered by men who had no understanding that they were actually doing God's work, fulfilling His will, even in their selfish indulgence. Such can even have an element of religion "*Blessed be the LORD for I am rich*" espousing an element of the so-called gospel of prosperity, which has been revived today in some parts of modern society. "*Their own shepherds pitied them not*". There was a breakdown between the leadership and the people with a polarisation and a contempt between the two classes which is always fatal for any society, that disconnect which ends in disaster!

Did God abandon His people? By no means, however He did give them what they asked for, the wages of sin, which they so eagerly served! "*I will no more pity the inhabitants of the land*". He had done so, but now no longer would He continue in that path. "*I will not deliver them*". They never deserved His pity, pity is never deserved, but something had changed, they had lost the self-critical analysis of Truth and began to believe their own propaganda. God is not against the "*poor of the flock*" but if they are content to abandon Him, they should not be surprised if He indulges their choices! The situation polarised between the Creator and the creature, "*My soul loathed them, and their soul also abhorred me*". What a terrible state to be in and yet so similar to the modern situation!

God broke His covenant which He had made with all the people. They had deserted Him and had placed themselves outside the various elements of the covenant. God never broke His covenant with the Fathers, but He did break His covenant with the individual people. See Acts 3v22-26 for an example of how both of these can happen together.

This breaking of the covenant followed the breaking of the staff "beauty". The Hebrew word translated here as "beauty" is Noam meaning pleasantness. The pleasantness of God was broken because the people had turned away from Him, not once, not twice but continually, demanding that they be as every other people, just like everyone else, and forsook the special relationship, and the worship of the God of Israel which had made them unique. Psalm 90v13-17 which also uses the word Noam is an interesting comparison of a sinful people who still knew what repentance was, and who actively sought after the pleasantness of God towards themselves! Wisdom is the only way back to pleasantness and the peace that follows. See Proverbs 3v17. Unless Israel were to find some wisdom then they would never be able to be cut back into the covenant as individuals. As a nation, God maintained His covenant with them, but as individuals they had always to embrace that option for themselves.

The second staff to be broken was bands. This represented the brotherhood between Israel and Judah. As with the other staff, the act of breaking did not mean that there was no way back for these two sections of the nation. The Prophet Ezekiel who wrote before Zechariah spoke of the re-joining of these sections in chapter 37v19,22. When did this breaking take place? Was it a reference back to the days of Rehoboam and Jeroboam when the nation initially split? Or does it refer to the severing of the nation again into those who were

scattered into the various nations of the world and those who remained in the land? It is often forgotten that Jews have continually inhabited at least some portions of their ancient homeland down throughout gentile history! That the breaking of bands follows the paying of the 30 pieces of silver to the potter in verse 13, which has been linked with the Lord Jesus Christ in New Testament times, aligns with the second of these.

The breaking of pleasantness and the scattering of Israel after 70CE would imply that this chapter is prophetic of then future events which to us are now firmly in the past. The shepherds of Zechariah are an important feature and the passing away of the Kings heralded a new age of shepherding which Zechariah and Haggai oversaw but sadly it soon followed the path of the previous experiences of the nation, a turning aside into selfishness and apostacy!

In Acts 5v33-42 three prominent but false leaders are mentioned by the Holy Spirit: Gamaliel, Theudas and Judas, two of whom set themselves up as the Christ and one who denied the real Christ. Although it is not certain perhaps this explicit link is a fulfilment of the detail here?

The foolish and lazy shepherds are certainly to be found in every age but there does seem to be a prophetic future emergence “in the land” of a particular shepherd. This is not the anti-christ who of course is not one person but a whole class of miscreants, which subsists during the long night of darkness from the first mission of Jesus to his promised return. Is this the last autocrat of Daniel 11v36 which is the Roman which latterly morphs into a religious power exalting and magnifying himself! That system loves to be regarded as a shepherd! Rome did have responsibility over the land but did not feed its people, as a religious power they also left the flock and embraced the philosophies of men although claiming to be Christian, followers of the great shepherd whom they actually betrayed!

A Voice from the Altar Russel Noonan