

# The Big Sellout

by Dave H. Roper

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In Zechariah 11, Zechariah is commanded to take a symbolic action. He is told to pasture a flock of sheep which is dedicated to destruction, verse 4:

**Thus says the Lord my God: "Pasture the flock doomed to slaughter."**

The prophets frequently were asked to do things which in our eyes would seem downright absurd. As a matter of fact, if you or I did those things, we would probably be committed to the nearest mental institution! Ezekiel always stands out in my mind as a very graphic example of the way God used his prophets to play-act certain principles, to speak allegorically through drama. In one instance Ezekiel was told to knock a hole through his wall and to take his baggage out through the hole--as an illustration of the way the exiles would have to escape when Jerusalem was under siege. I can see Ezekiel marching into the bedroom, pickax on his shoulder, and Mrs. Ezekiel following him, saying, "You're going to do what?! You don't like the front door any more?!"

Another day he went and lay down on his left side in the street. She said, "How long do you expect to do this?" He said, "Three hundred and ninety days." "Three hundred and ninety days?!" "Yes But it's all right, because then I'm going to spend forty days on my right side." One day Ezekiel said to his wife that he was going off into the hills to prophesy to the mountains, and I am sure she said, "Good, good!" But through all of this the Lord spoke to his people in unforgettable ways. The Lord is infinitely creative--you never know what he is going to do next. And he did these things in order to grasp people's attention and fix it upon his word. This is what he does with Zechariah. He tells him to go out and take the implements of a shepherd, and to shepherd the flock which is destined to slaughter.

I am almost certain that this was the flock of sheep which was maintained for the temple sacrifice. A field close by the temple was allocated for this purpose, and there Zechariah became the shepherd over them. In addition to Zechariah and the sheep, some other elements of this allegory are given to us here--a number of other people who are involved in the drama--verse 5:

**"Those who buy and 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."**

There are three additional elements here: those who buy them, those who sell them, and those who tend the flock. It appears from this passage that the shepherds are totally indifferent to the fate of the sheep. The sheep were destined to die, and no one seems to care about them. It is to this flock that Zechariah is sent to be a shepherd.

Now, what do these elements stand for? The sheep, of course, stand for the nation of Israel. Zechariah takes the place of the Lord, in this drama. He is the good shepherd who cares for the sheep. The merchants who buy and sell them I believe to be the political units of that time--and the time yet future. This is a prediction which looks yet downstream, historically, to another fulfillment. The merchants here refer to the different political groups that oppressed Israel, buying and selling them. The shepherds, in line with the way this symbol is used throughout Scripture, refer to the various religious leaders who shepherded the nation of Israel, particularly those yet to come. At the time Zechariah was writing, the religious leadership was basically sound and strong. So he is not referring to his own time, but rather to some future time, when Israel would have shepherds who would be totally indifferent to their need.

The striking thing about this passage is that, though the sheep are oppressed, nevertheless they are the ones being

blamed for their oppression. Normally, as we have seen repeatedly in these postexilic minor prophets, the nation Israel, which is oppressed, is encouraged to look forward to the time when God is going to lift them out of their oppressed state and give them again the glory which was theirs formerly. But that is not true in this passage. Here the nation is blamed for their own oppression. I believe that the point the Lord is trying to make through Zechariah's message is that God never intended his people to be in bondage to anyone. They were to be free. The only reason they were oppressed was because they had chosen to put themselves under the subjection of someone other than the Lord himself. They chose their master, and now they had to live with the results of their choice.

Throughout the Old and New Testaments alike, this principle is stated again and again. God wants us to be free. His intention is that we reign in life. There is no reason why any habit or sin or pattern of life should ever dominate us. God's intention is that we be liberated, totally free. But that only happens when we place ourselves under his authority, when he is truly Lord in our life. If we choose another master, God will allow us to do so. But after a period of time we discover that we are no longer free; we are subject to the master we have chosen.

There is a wonderful example of this in the history of Judah, the Southern Kingdom of the divided nation. It took place about three hundred years prior to this time, during Isaiah's ministry in the Eighth Century B.C., when Jerusalem was under siege. The Northern Kingdom of Israel had swept through the northern part of Judah and had destroyed the small Judean cities around Jerusalem. Israel was allied with a number of other nations--the Syrians, and the Edomites and Philistines who came in from the south. Thus Jerusalem was encircled. Isaiah went to Ahaz, who was the king of Judah at the time, and encouraged him to trust the Lord, to let the Lord deliver them. At a later period in Judah's history, Isaiah was to go to King Hezekiah to encourage him to turn to the Lord for deliverance. Hezekiah did trust the Lord, and God delivered Jerusalem in a miraculous way. But Ahaz did not. Ahaz felt it would be much the smarter political move to ally himself with Assyria, and he did just that. He made arrangements with Assyria to fight against the Northern Kingdom, and the Assyrians came against Israel and destroyed them.

But the Lord said to Isaiah, in Isaiah 8, "Because this people have refused the waters of Shiloah that flow gently [i.e., the Lord himself, the peaceful One, who wants to minister to you and wash you gently]... therefore, behold, the Lord is bringing up against them the waters of the Euphrates...and it will rise over all its channels. ..it will overflow and pass on, reaching even to the neck." What Ahaz did not know was that in buying the services of Assyria, he sold himself out, along with his entire nation, and the Assyrians kept coming right on through Israel into Judah, and made them pay tribute to Assyria. From that time on, Judah was under attack by other nations. It was only for very short periods of time that they had any autonomy at all.

You see, this is the choice which faces us over and over again. We can put ourselves under the authority of the Lord himself--and that is liberty. Or we can choose another master and then we must serve him. Is this not what Jesus said to the Pharisees in John 8? "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." The Pharisees were angered by his statement, and their response was, "We're free; we're not in bondage to anyone!" Of course, for eight hundred years they had been in bondage to Egypt and Assyria and Babylon and Persia and Greece, and now they were subject to Rome. But, in their opinion, they were free! Jesus went on to say, "Every one who commits sin is a slave to sin." They were in bondage to sin, because they had chosen to make that their master.

So this is what Zechariah is saying. The sheep are to be blamed for their oppressed state. This never should have come about. Had they continued to follow the Lord, they would have known liberty and been able to exercise freedom. But because they chose another master, now they were in subjection to it. So Zechariah is called of God to go out to the nation and act out this drama, this allegory, as a way of describing their circumstances. He is told, first, to take the implements of a shepherd, verse 7:

**So I pastured the flock doomed to slaughter, hence the afflicted of the flock. And I took for myself two staves: the one I called Favor [or "Pleasantness"], and the other I called Union; so I pastured the flock.**

Normally shepherds carry a rod and a staff. A rod is something like a club, and was used for defending the sheep

and for disciplining the sheep. The staff was a shepherd's crook, and was used to extricate lambs from tight places. But in this case Zechariah is told not to take a rod and a staff, but two staffs, two shepherd's crooks. And he is to name one Pleasantness, and the other Union. We are fond of naming inanimate things. If you have a six-shooter around the house, you may refer to it as "Old Betsy". We refer to Walt McCuistion's car as "Kermit the Frog", because it is a little green "bug-eyed" Sprite.

But this is not what Zechariah has in mind. The names are intended to signify something very important. The ministry of the good shepherd is to be characterized by pleasantness and by union. The term "pleasantness" turns up in the name Naomi, the mother-in-law of Ruth. When she came back from Moab, she described the tragedies that took place in her life there--the loss of her husband and her sons. Then she said, "Don't call me Naomi, or Pleasant; call me Marah, or Bitter." Pleasantness, then, is the antonym of bitterness. It is sweetness, or graciousness. This was to be the characteristic of the shepherd. The other staff he named Union, or togetherness--one who puts things together, integrates things.

Then we are told that he fired three shepherds, verse 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.**

This term translated "annihilated" is much like our term "terminated". It does not mean he killed them, but that he fired them. They lost their employment. He got rid of the shepherds who were taking care of these temple flocks, because of their attitude toward the sheep. He himself then took the entire responsibility for shepherding the sheep. verses 9 and 10:

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." "And I took my staff Favor and cut it in pieces, to break my covenant which I had made with all the peoples.

He not only terminates the employment of the shepherds; he himself leaves the job. He says to the sheep, who were bitter toward him because he released the shepherds, "All right; if you won't receive my ministry, then I'll leave you to die. What is to die, let it die, and what is to be annihilated, let it be annihilated; and the rest of you can devour one another." He walked off the job, and he broke the staff he had named Pleasantness. His next action, verses 12 and following, was to ask for his wages:

And 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. 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. Then I cut my second staff, Union, in pieces, to break the brotherhood between Judah and Israel.

The phrase "that magnificent price" is intended to be ironic. Thirty shekels of silver is a very small sum of money--the price that was paid for an injured slave, one who could no longer do any work. Of course, there would be nothing more useless than an injured slave. So, after he had given himself to the care of the flock for at least thirty days, they gave him his wages - a shekel a day. He, in turn, took the money and threw it to the potter in the house of the Lord. In the Hebrew idiom, that was throwing it away. At that time in Israel, the potter was of the lowest social order and worked for the smallest wages. So the term "throw it to the potter" was idiomatic, signifying giving it away, as something that was worthless. Then he broke his second staff, the staff of union. They had seen his ministry and valued it so little; they "esteemed him not."

Now, what does all of this mean? The drama is not explained in the passage. You have to wait some five hundred years before you get the explanation. It is explained and fulfilled in the ministry of the Lord himself. He was the Good Shepherd who gave up his life for the sheep. He is the One who came with the two staffs, the staff of graciousness and pleasantness, and the staff of union. Wherever the Lord went (and wherever he goes today) he solved the problem of bitterness and fragmentation. He is the One who makes life sweet and pleasant and gracious. He is the One who puts us together and keeps us together. It was true then; it is true today. It is

interesting, is it not, that this was a Shepherd who did not carry a rod. John wrote of Jesus that he came "not to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved." His was a redemptive ministry.

But what does Zechariah's terminating the three shepherds correspond to in Jesus' ministry? There have been something like forty attempts to interpret this, and I am going to add the forty-first! The ancient Jews felt that he was referring to the ministry of Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. They saw the three shepherds here not as evil shepherds, but as shepherds whose ministry was cut off because of the lack of response on the part of the people. They put it in the past. Others have seen these three shepherds as referring to the three postexilic prophets, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, whose ministry likewise was cut off, as eventually the people turned a deaf ear and refused to listen to them. Some see these shepherds as the political forces of Assyria, Babylon, and Greece, which preceded the Roman empire during whose time Jesus was born.

But I think the three shepherds correspond to an incident which took place on a particular day of the Lord's life, just prior to his crucifixion. I would like you to turn to Matthew 22 and 23, and reflect a bit on this amazing passage.

The day began with the appearance of a group of men called the "Herodians." We do not know who the Herodians were, nor what they believed. But it does appear that they were more concerned with political than with spiritual matters. They seem to have been dedicated to preserving in office the family of Herod, and that is as much as we know about them. They are the ones who came to Jesus with the question, "Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar?" Evidently their focus was very narrow, and limited to politics. It has always been interesting to me that Jesus had to borrow a coin to illustrate his point. He probably turned to Peter and said, "Peter, do you have fifty cents?" Peter felt around in all his pockets, but could not come up with any money, so Jesus had to borrow a coin from the Herodians. Jesus held it up and said, "All right, whose inscription do you see on this coin?" They said, "Caesar's." Then came Jesus' well-known reply: "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." That is, he established once for all the principle that there are two legitimate spheres of authority. While it may be proper to be involved in various types of political movements, there is a higher obligation--your relationship to God. You must render to God the things that are God's. The passage says that the Herodians never asked him another question. They were terminated.

The next group was the Sadducees, who were the rationalists of their day. They did not believe in the resurrection, and came with the question about their friend who had six brothers. The friend died, and the next oldest brother married his widow, according to the Old Testament custom of levirate marriages, in order to raise up descendants to his brother. You know the story - how one after another of the brothers married her and then died. (They should have checked out her cooking more carefully!) In time all seven died. The Sadducees' question was, "Whose wife will she be in the kingdom of heaven?" As you know, the Lord skirted right around that question, because some questions do not deserve an answer. They are not asked because people want an answer. This was the case here. They were trying to trip Jesus up. So he ignored their question and asked them one in return: "Have you never read the Scriptures? You know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God. As for the resurrection, have you not read what was said by God, 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'?" He makes his point on the basis of the fact that "I am" is a present-tense verb, not past. "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." That is, "Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are still alive; therefore, there is a resurrection." The Sadducees were absolutely dumbfounded. They had no answer.

Then the Pharisees came. Their problem was that they were bound up in the law, and had little love in their life. They asked, "Which is the great commandment in the law?" And the Lord skewered them with the greatest commandment of all: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." They had missed the heart of the law in their preoccupation with the tenets of the law. Matthew says that from that point on, nobody asked him any more questions. All three groups, representing the three classes of leadership in Israel at that time, were terminated.

Then Jesus said to them, "Let me ask you a question. Your rabbis say that the Christ is the son of David, right?" Then he quoted Psalm 110, in which David says, "The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand, till I put thy

enemies under thy feet.' " Jesus said, "If the Christ is the son of David, why then did David call him Lord?" And they did not have any answer; they were out of words. Jesus went on to say to the people, "Woe to the Pharisees!" Seven woes he pronounced upon them. Then he turned to the people and said,

**"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! Behold, your house is forsaken and desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'"**

And, symbolically, he took his staff Union and broke it, and walked out of the temple. And he will not enter the temple again until his Second Coming.

The history of Israel from then on was a period of total chaos. This was a time when a group of cut-throat professional assassins arose called the "Sicarii", because they carried little daggers, "sicae", in their belts. They would pass through the streets of Jerusalem secretly murdering enemies, selling themselves to anyone who wanted an enemy removed. One group of Jews after another would seize power and then be overthrown, and things went from bad to worse. (By the way, do not blame the Jews--we would have done the same things. I know I would have.) Fighting broke out in the city of Jerusalem, and the Romans finally got tired of it. They marched against the city to try to quiet things down, but the Jews went absolutely insane, and fought desperately. Titus pleaded with them to give up, for he did not want to destroy the temple. He set fire to the gates of the inner walls, to gain access to the court, and the temple itself caught on fire and burned. But that was never Titus' desire or intent. Finally he became so exasperated and enraged by the actions of the Jews toward the Romans that he slaughtered the population of Jerusalem. There were many pilgrims in the city who had come for the passover, and some historians tell us that over a million Jews died in Jerusalem at that time.

Why? Do you remember that when Jesus stood on trial before the nation, their response was this: "We have no king but Caesar!" They chose Caesar instead of Jesus Christ, and had to live with the results of that choice--because it was Caesar, ultimately, who destroyed them. They sold Jesus out for thirty pieces of silver. Remember that Judas betrayed Jesus for thirty shekels of silver, and later tried to return the money. But the priests refused to accept it, so he cast it into the temple. That money was used to buy a potter's field, a place to bury transients. They esteemed him not, and chose Caesar rather than Jesus. Their perspective was all wrong.

My car was in the shop the other day having some body work done on it, and my friend the shop owner was out of loaners. The car he gave me was, by his own description, a pile of junk. I drove it home and parked it in front of the house, hoping none of the neighbors would see it. My little boy, Joshua, who is five, went running out to this car and got in and checked it out. He must have heard me badmouthing it to my wife, Carolyn, because he began to refer to it as "the dog". Every time we would go anyplace and would start to get in our other car he would say, "Let's take the dog." "We don't want to take that car; let's take the good car." "No, take the dog!" "Now, Joshua, you know that it doesn't run very well; it goes sideways down the road. uses a lot of gas...." "No, I want to take the dog!" Later I found out why. There was a little armrest in the back seat that dropped down, and Joshua could sit on that and, for the first time in his life, he could sit down and see out of the car! He valued that car very highly because he had an entirely different point of view than I did. He did not care if it was a dog; that car was precious to him.

That was the problem with the Jews of Jesus' day, and it is the problem with us. Our perspective is all wrong. We do not know how to evaluate things. Jesus is not the Precious One to us, and so we choose something else, and end up serving what we have chosen. It becomes our master.

The passage goes on, beginning in verse 15, to tell us that Zechariah was told to take up the equipment of a "foolish" shepherd. The term means an insensitive, stiff, stubborn shepherd--"thick" is the idea--someone who does not respond.

**And the Lord said to me, "Take again for yourself the equipment of a foolish shepherd. For behold, I am going to raise up a shepherd in the land who will not care for the perishing, seek**

**the scattered, heal the broken, or sustain the one standing, but will devour the flesh of the fat sheep and tear off their hoofs. Woe to the worthless shepherd Who leaves the flock! A sword will be on his arm And on his right eye! His arm will be totally withered, And his right eye will be blind."**

This may refer to the succession of religious leaders in Israel. It certainly must refer to the future time when a man will arise in Israel--he will be a Jew--who will have no regard for the God of his fathers, and who is the false prophet spoken of in the book of Revelation. He will be followed, but he will not care for the sheep. He will destroy them. (It is interesting that even in this note of gloom and chaos and darkness, there is an upturn at the end, because God says, "I'm going to destroy him." That is, "His right arm--his strong arm, the arm with which he wields a sword--will be withered, and his right eye--with which he takes aim--will be blind.") But he will appear. Jesus referred to him when he said, "I come in my own name, but you don't receive me. One will come later in his own name, and him you will receive." He is coming, but God will deal with him. He is coming, you see, because God's people did not esteem their Lord of any value. Other things seemed to be of more value, and they chose another master, and that master subdued them.

I want to tell you an apocryphal story. It is not true, so do not believe any of it. Do you remember the time when Jesus was crossing the Sea of Galilee with his disciples (That part is true; that happened.) Jesus got into the boat with his twelve disciples and they started to cross the Sea of Galilee. If there ever was a sure thing in the world, it was that trip. God would never let his Anointed sink and drown in the middle of the Sea of Galilee, because there was work yet to be done. Besides, Jesus said, "Let's get in the boat and go to the other side." He did not say, "Let's get in the boat and go out to the middle and sink." So they had his word for it. That boat was the safest place in the universe that day. I do not care how stormy it was, how bleak things may have looked-- perhaps the waves were picking up a bit--that was the safest place in the universe! But the disciples did not know it, and neither would we, had we been there on that day.

Here is where the story becomes apocryphal. Let's imagine that this boat belongs to a Sidonian sailor. He is a Syrophoenician, and still worships the Phoenician gods. He is a pagan, an unbeliever, who worships idols, and it is his boat. Jesus and the disciples get in, and they start across the Sea of Galilee, Jesus goes back to the stern and goes to sleep. The wind begins to rise, the storm approaches, the waves get bigger, the ship begins to roll a bit. The disciples get a little nervous and look back at the Lord, and he's asleep. Then they look at the Sidonian sailor, and he's cool--no anxiety, no restlessness, perfectly at peace. Things get worse, the boat begins to creak and groan, acts as if it is going to fall apart. And the disciples are getting considerably more nervous, but Jesus is still asleep.

They go to the Sidonian sailor, who is sitting at the helm perfectly relaxed, smoking a big black cigar. They say, "Tell us, what is the secret of your poise?" He says, "It's because I worship Lady Asherah." He reaches under his seat and pulls out an 8-foot statue of Lady Asherah, overlaid with gold--a beautiful thing, magnificently inlaid with jewels. I am sure Judas must have said, "Good Grief! That must have cost thousands!" The sailor pats his Asherah, utters a few lines from an Ugaritic Baal epic, rubs its tummy. The disciples say, "That's what you're trusting in?" He replies, "Right! That's what gives me peace, that's what gives me poise. I'm not worried." Peter looks at the Asherah, and then he looks at the Lord. Jesus is asleep, and he has a hole in his sandal the size of a silver dollar. His feet are dirty because he hasn't had a chance yet to wash them, the hem of his robe is tattered and dirty, his hair is hanging down over his face because it is raining, and he is snoring! And Peter, suddenly incredulous, asks, "We're trusting that man instead of that magnificent, impressive goddess?"

About this time the ship gives a lurch, and it appears certain to break up. The Sidonian sailor stands up and says, "Well, you men have never been on the sea in a storm like this, but I have, and I know that this ship is about to go down. I'm abandoning ship; you can do as you please." So he takes his Asherah and leaps into the water. The disciples are torn--"Which way to go? What do you do in a case like this?" About this time someone shakes the Lord. "Lord, don't you care that we perish?" He stands and says, "Hush. Be still!" And the Sea of Galilee becomes like a sea of glass.

So here is this sailor with his Asherah, about ten feet off the starboard bow, treading water like mad--because this is not a wooden Asherah; it is a graven image that weighs 136 pounds! Suddenly he is discovering that this thing

is not an asset! As a matter of fact, it is a drag! He is going down for the third time, and the Lord says, "Would you like to get into the boat?"

The Lord allows these crises to come into our lives in order to show us where the true value lies. Because our perspective is distorted. We do not esteem him to be of any great value. Times like this come, and then we see that he is the One who brings peace and integration to our lives, and makes things right. Oh, that we would see him that way all the time! Peter said, "To those who believe, he is the Precious One." I wonder if he is that to us today?

Father, we thank you that we have discovered in times past that Jesus is the Precious One. May we live that way each day, attributing to you the value and the worth that is properly yours. We ask in Christ's name, Amen.

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