

Zechariah 13:7-9 *“Awake, sword, against my shepherd, against the man who is close to me!” declares the Lord Almighty. “Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered, and I will turn my hand against the little ones. ⁸In the whole land,” declares the Lord, “two-thirds will be struck down and perish; yet one-third will be left in it. ⁹This third I will put into the fire; I will refine them like silver and test them like gold. They will call on my name and I will answer them; I will say, ‘They are my people,’ and they will say, ‘The Lord is our God.’”*

Dear friends in Christ our Savior,

To begin today, I want to direct your attention to the picture in the worship folder on page 10. Some of you may have seen this picture before and if you have, thanks for bearing with me. What do you see when you look at that picture? An old hag or a young lady? If you see the old hag, you are noticing her nose line and her mouth with her eyes looking down towards the ground with a blank expression. If you see the young lady, you see her jaw line, ears, just a tip of her nose as she is looking away over her right shoulder. Whoever drew this is a master artist, one much better than I. Looking at the same picture, you can either see something ugly and hideous or something beautiful and lovely. It depends on your perspective.

The same is true with the sufferings, challenges and problems we see in life. We can look at the same difficulty and trouble and see it completely different. It all depends on your perspective. The perspective from which you view suffering will determine what picture you see of God. Or to say the same thing differently, how you see God will give you perspective in your suffering—whether that’s persecution you might face for being a Christian and holding on to the truth of God’s word or the physical challenges and sufferings you have to face in life or the other difficulties and troubles that will come as you live your life on this earth. What we hear today in our text is something that could cause you to say either, “Wait a minute, this isn’t a God I’m sure I like” or “What an awesome God whom I love and serve with my life.” ***It all depends on your perspective.***

Zechariah was a prophet who ministered to God’s people around 500 B.C. God’s people had just returned from their captivity in Babylon. They were working at re-establishing God’s Temple and their civilization around it. In his book of prophecy, Zechariah spoke to the people about God’s will during their return from captivity. But, as one of the last prophets in the OT era, the second half of his book dealt specifically with the Messiah that God would soon be sending into the world. In the verses preceding our text, he had prophesied about the day when their land would be cleansed of the false religions around them. He was pointing the people ahead to the time when the church would no longer be plagued by evil and falsehood, when the devil no longer would steal members away and turn them into strangers who confess some foreign religious idea. While we can see fulfillment of this prophecy along the way of history when spiritual housecleaning took place in God’s church such as the Reformation, we see the ultimate fulfillment of this prophecy on the last day of this world when the Lord will call an end to all false religion. Yet before that happened, some refining needed to happen along the way. This is what Zechariah talks about in our text.

He begins our text, *“Awake, sword, against my shepherd, against the man who is close to me!” declares the Lord Almighty. “Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered, and I will turn my hand against the little ones.* The shepherd who is referred to here is Jesus. He quoted these very words on the night before his death. He knew as he sat with the disciples at the last supper in the upper room that the sword predicted by the prophet, Zechariah, would soon strike him down. The difficult part for us as we consider this is to note who is doing the action—God. God is not just allowing the sword to strike the shepherd, he is telling the sword to strike the shepherd. Then when sheep scattered God promised, *“I will turn my hands against the little ones.”* Not only does he promise that 2/3 would be struck down, but that he would throw the other 1/3 into the fire. Again, God isn’t just allowing this to happen. He was actually going to cause it to happen. No one wants to go into the fire. We like to sit near a fire on a cool or cold night. That’s great. But no one wants to go into the fire. Here God promised his faithful people that’s exactly where he would send them.

This is a bit hard for us to wrap our minds around. We’re not comfortable with the fact that God often allows troubles into the lives of his people. It’s much more disconcerting to hear God promise to be the one actually sending suffering into the lives of his people. On the one hand, we could look at this and come away with this perspective: God is an angry, mean, maybe even sadistic God who enjoys watching people suffer. He’s cold hearted, lacking compassion and cares nothing for his people. We might even go so far as to say, “Wait a minute: That isn’t a God I like or one I want to follow or in whom I place my trust.” The disciples didn’t necessarily like this either. They were at this point still hoping for a different kind of a Savior—one who would give them power and prosperity, comfort and ease and their best life here on this earth. When those expectations were crushed in the Garden of Gethsemane what did they do? They ran away. They scattered, just as Zechariah had prophesied! They had the wrong perspective.

There is another perspective to this. God did strike the shepherd. He not only allowed Jesus to be arrested and brutally treated he caused that treatment of him. He sent that treatment to him. Why? Why would God strike his own Son in such a way? Because he enjoyed watching him suffer? Because he was angry with him? Because he couldn’t have cared less? Of course not. You know the answer: Because he loved you! He knew the only way for you to live eternally with him in heaven was for a perfect sacrifice to be made on your behalf. He knew the only one who could make that perfect sacrifice was his Son. He loved you enough to send that horrible treatment on his Son—including the suffering of hell itself—so that you could live with him forever. God wasn’t angry with Jesus nor did he enjoy watching him suffer. He loves you and wanted you to live with him forever. This gives us a different perspective on this entire situation. We are looking at the same data and the same situation, but now we see something totally different. Instead of anger and enjoyment, we see the depths of his love.

We see the same thing when God promises that he will throw his faithful people into the fire also. We see the 2/3 who are destroyed as those who rebelled against God and the 1/3 thrown into the fire as the remnant of people who remained faithful to him. Again, it’s hard to grasp that God would not only allow the fire to affect his people but that he would throw them into it! Why would we want to worship a God who would do that? Why would we want to follow a God who would ask that kind of a commitment from his people? God specifies what kind of fire this is into which he would throw his people: not a fire of judgment or condemnation but a refining fire. In other words, this fire into which God promises to throw his people is not a destructive fire (i.e., one that would destroy them) but a constructive fire—one that would build them up. A refining fire serves a very important purpose for gold and silver. It

purifies the gold and silver by taking out the impurities. It makes the gold and silver stronger. The refining fire into which God sends his people accomplishes the same purpose: to make their faith more pure and stronger.

Take for example Jesus disciples who had to go through the refining fire of the events of Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Those were difficult times, excruciatingly so. They were scared and feared for their lives. They were horrified by seeing with their own eyes what happened to Jesus. They went through a huge period of uncertainty and doubt. These were changed men after this happened. The disciples who before Jesus' death feared persecution would even welcome it after Jesus' death. When they were beaten, they rejoiced because they were counted worthy of suffering disgrace for Jesus. The gold had been purified. They viewed the sufferings from a completely different perspective.

This gives us an entirely different view on the problems and challenges we face in life. While our first reaction toward challenge and difficulty is to see that as evidence God has left or abandon us, we can now see the same thing from a different perspective. We can see it now as God intending to strengthen us, to test us and to build us up. This allows us to view any problem or persecution through a different lens: not the condemning or judging fire of God but the refining fire God uses to make us stronger in our faith. When faced with persecution or opposition to what we believe, that is not a time to fold and give up. Rather, it is a time of testing God uses to strengthen us. It is a time to dig into God's word, better understand what we believe and learn how to better articulate it. This time of suffering makes you stronger in what you believe and why you believe it. God used that as an opportunity to test your faith. It just depends on your perspective.

There is a Latin word Martin Luther used for what we are talking about: "Tentatio". There isn't one English word that covers what "Tentatio" means. Tentatio is trials, struggles, temptation, suffering and affliction. It is any bad thing which happens to us in this life that tempts us to sin or hurts us physically or emotionally. It covers everything from being caught in a traffic jam to getting your car totaled in a multicar pile up, from losing your wallet to losing your job, from getting a cold to being diagnosed with cancer. Tentatio is the word Luther used to describe a truth he discovered in Scripture about how God operates in this world in his quest to get us to heaven. We see that in all three readings today, but especially in this text where God essentially promises: "I will make you suffer. I will make your life like walking through fire."

So God's grand plan for getting us to heaven is making us suffer; filling our lives with Tentatio? We cringe at this thought. This cringing is a product of the world around us. Think about how much time and money and brainpower our world spends on avoiding suffering, or at the very least lessening affliction, pain and suffering. We have air conditioned homes so we don't have to be too hot. We sleep in beds made just to our specifications so we don't wake up with back pain. We think of all the medications that exist to relieve suffering and pain. We live in a world where pain and discomfort are unacceptable. We live in a world obsessed with avoiding suffering. So listening to God's promise to put us through suffering is about as countercultural as we could get! Our first reaction is: "This isn't a God that I want!" We would prefer the God who rewards us for good behavior and takes away all of our problems. You're familiar with the term "helicopter parent"—one who hovers over their child and watches like a hawk every single second? Now there is a new term: "lawnmower parent". This the parent who mows down any obstacle that confronts the child so that he/she doesn't have to face hardships. That's the God that we want! We want a God who mows down any obstacles in our path and removes all of the suffering from our lives.

That's not who God is...and it's a good thing. God knows best for us. How can our suffering possibly be in the plans of a good and loving God for our salvation? The problem with lawnmower parents is that they never teach their children how to properly handle trouble. There will be problems and troubles that they have to deal with in life. While it's hard to watch, it's important for a parent to sit back and let the child struggle a bit. It teaches them how to handle adversity. It makes them stronger in the end and better able to handle troubles when they come. God has an important reason for sending suffering into our lives. It refines the impurities in us. Our faith is not perfect. It is filled with impurities. The only way to remove them is to burn them away. So God comes with fire, with suffering, to bring us face to face with some refining realities: we need God. We need him way more than our impure hearts tend to realize. We think that personal health can make us happy. But when our health deteriorates, we come face to face with the reality that we were hoping our health would give to us something only God can give to us: true and lasting happiness. We think that our families can give us hope and equip us to handle the future. But when family members die we come face to face with the fact that we were hoping our families would give us only what God can give us: hope and a future.

God forgive us for viewing our problems from the perspective of judgment and condemnation. God forgive us for accusing Him of being unloving and uncaring as we face problem after problem. That's exactly why God punished Jesus—purposely punished Jesus. So he can forgive us for our sins and display the true depths of his love. If we truly focus on that love which God has shown us in Jesus, we can see our troubles and problems from a completely different perspective. We can see how God uses affliction, suffering and pain to show us just how much he loves us and how he uses Tentatio to draw us closer to himself and to heaven. We can see these problems and troubles as God's way of grabbing us by the shoulders when we are tempted to turn our backs on him, tempted to run down the broad and wide path to hell and turn us around as he says, "Look at me! Whatever you are chasing cannot and will not save you from this world. Look at me! Look at my Son. Look at his cross and the empty tomb. Look at my love. This is the only thing that matters!"

God's fires may be painful, unspeakably so at times. They won't stop until will we leave this word. When those times of pain and suffering and hardship and trouble come, don't run away from God. Turn to him. Call on him. Confidently pray to him as you hold tightly to his love and trust firmly in his promises to see you through. View this as another opportunity to strengthen your faith as you trust in God. God promises to hear you. He promises to hold on to you. He promises to call you his people. You can look at your pain and suffering and see something ugly and hideous (his judgment and anger) or something beautiful and lovely (his amazing love). It all depends on your perspective. Amen.