

Theme: Scattered Sheep.
Text: Zechariah 13:7-9

The Word of God we'll consider today is from Zechariah chapter 13.

**⁷ “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.
⁸ In the whole land,” declares the LORD,
“two-thirds will be struck down and perish;
yet one-third will be left in it.
⁹ This 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.’ ”**

This is the Word of the Lord.

One of the things that makes the Bible a book unlike any other is that it's filled with ancient writings that spoke about Jesus and his work long before he was born. And this wasn't made up after the fact either... we have copies of these Old Testament Scriptures that are ancient, in fact some copies even date back before the time Jesus walked the earth. And I suppose you might look at these things that were foretold which Jesus fulfilled and chalk them up to coincidence if it happened once or twice... but there are dozens and dozens of very specific prophecies that Jesus fulfills.

In these weeks leading up to Holy Week and Easter this year we're taking a little time in the middle of the week to consider just a handful of such prophecies – all from one book of the Old Testament – the book of the prophet Zechariah. Zechariah lived about 500 years before Jesus was born and he was called to serve God's people who had returned from exile in Babylon and were now trying to rebuild their lives and their nation.

Zechariah came from a family of priests and so he knew what it was to spend time devoted to spiritual things. God's call would give him work primarily of prophet though, not priest, as he a message to the returning exiles that pointed them to God's promise to restore them and his ultimate restoration that would arrive with the coming Savior.

In the verses before us today from chapter 13 we find words that Jesus himself would repeat on the night before his death. These are words we've heard in our Passion Reading again this year, do you remember? After the upper room Jesus went out to the Garden of Gethsemane. While they were headed there Jesus told them all what would happen in just a short time. Matthew wrote:

Jesus told them, “This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written: “ ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.’ But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee.” Peter replied, “Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will.” “Truly I tell you,” Jesus answered, “this very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times.” But Peter declared, “Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.” And all the other disciples said the same. Matthew 26:31-35

And we all know that Jesus words came true. When he was arrested every single disciple ran away. The Shepherd was struck and the sheep fled... they scattered just as Jesus said they would... just as God has long foretold through his prophet Zechariah. And yet as sad as it is to see this unfold on the pages of Scripture... as heartbreaking as it is to know... to know deep down that we would've run away too if we'd been there, leaving Jesus all alone... we know this is how it had to be. **“Awake, sword, against my shepherd, against the man who is close to me!” declares the LORD Almighty.**

Yes, God's plan of salvation would only be fulfilled when God struck down the Good Shepherd and left him alone to face the wrath, to endure the cross, to die for sheep that ran in fear, for sheep like us that love to wander. This was God's plan – for Jesus, and Jesus alone to accomplish our salvation through his death on the cross. And he did it. And this changes things for us. It changes things forever.

Isn't that what is described next by Zechariah and what we see follow after Jesus' death? Zechariah speaks of two-thirds being struck down and perishing with a third left that the Lord would refine and remake into his people once again. This is what Jesus did with his fearful disciples when he appeared after his resurrection to restore them and announce their redemption. This is what Jesus continued to do with those men as he rid them of their fear and failure and filled them with forgiveness... and sent them out with bold words and a beautiful witness. And if you know anything of the disciples after this time you know they faced trials of the most severe kind... but they faced them with confidence because Christ had purged them and purified them and prepared them to be the people he wanted them to be...

And he does the same with us. God looks at you and he sees gold and silver – he sees value in you. But he also sees the impurities... the imperfections... the sin and error that keep you from shining and cover up the priceless treasure you are in his sight. God loves you despite these imperfections, but he also loves you too much to let them remain with you. And so he does what Zechariah foretold. He **puts you in the fire... he refines you like silver and tests you like gold.**

God puts us in the fire—not to destroy us but to develop us. A husband loses a job. Parents get divorced. A spouse dies. And of course, the world piles on... thanks to the reach of media in our modern age we see and experience more and more of the world's catastrophes and suffering. But in the midst of such fires there is hope because God is there to bring us through.

Isn't this what he did with believers of the past? God's test brought out their best. This is why king David prays in **Psalm 26: “Test me LORD, and try me; refine my heart and my mind.”** David hates his sin and longs to become more mature, more fervent, more faithful. This is the attitude Christ seeks to develop in us too.

And we need Christ to do that work. Because when these fires of life come there are different ways we can deal with it.

We can let it *destroy* us. “A storm has crushed me and ruined my life. Every day is worse than the day before. I have no future!”

We can let it *define* us. For the rest of our life we relive our disaster, every day. It defines us. It's who we are—totally, completely, eternally.

Or we can let the fire *develop* us. But how? When our heart is crushed, the temptation is to turn away from God. The temptation is to go as far from God as we can. But turning back into scattered sheep is not the solution.

When things go badly in the court room, the living room, the conference room, or the emergency room... we must remember the Shepherd who was struck down for us... who faced the fires we'll never have to face... and remember that this one, Jesus Christ, is with you. He does not ignore you. Neglect you. Overlook you. Or forget you. Christ is refining and purifying you. God's Word is sure. Christ's sacrifice is finished. You are safe.

One of those men who was scattered on the night Jesus was arrested better understood this later in life. Peter wrote in his first letter that **our faith is "more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire."** **1 Peter 1:7** Suffering purifies faith to make it genuine and alive. And by faith God helps us accept the pain. He helps us surrender our will to his. We do not surrender as a victim of cruelty. We don't surrender with bitterness in our heart. We surrender in faith.

Peter would also write: **"In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials."** **1 Pet 1:6** The Christian life does not exempt us from fiery trials. Christ does, however, give us the strength and wisdom not to be destroyed by them. Zechariah states God's goal for us at the close of our text: **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.'**

God grant you all eyes of faith to see these truths more clearly as you continue your journey to the cross again this year. Yes, the Shepherd was struck for us and our salvation. Yes, the sheep were scattered. But God has done what was needed to gather his scattered flock together again, and to purify and prepare that flock to follow after our Savior and find the blessed end to our sufferings just as he did. Remember – Jesus, after his fiery ordeal on Good Friday was raised to life on Easter Sunday. Beauty came from ashes. Life came out of death. And eternal victory from what proved to be a temporary trial. We can endure our present circumstances too in the sure and certain hope that they are not the end for us. Sadness, sorrow, sickness, and suffering will never be the last word. Instead, we will hear the words God spoke through Zechariah resound for all eternity: **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.'** Amen.