

Zechariah 13:7-9 ⁷ *"Awake, O 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 bring 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.'"*

The LORD our God purifies our faith.

1. He uses difficulties and challenges to strengthen us.

2. Refined in the fire he sees his image in us.

In our lessons for today we have several examples of men who went through a lot in their lives. They faced difficult circumstances. They faced difficult decisions. There were times that it would have been a lot less trouble to take the easy way out. But they didn't and because of this their faith was put to the test and strengthened.

In faith Joseph trusted in his Lord despite all his troubles. His own brothers sold him into slavery. His master's wife ruined the good name that he established for himself. He was thrown in prison, forgotten, but the Lord was with him and would use all of this for his good and for the good of many others. He was a man who seemingly had many reasons to doubt God and give up on the faith. But in the end Joseph stood before his brothers as Pharaoh's right hand man and was able to look at his brothers and say, *"You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."* (***Genesis 50:20***). This was a faith that was tested by the difficulties of life. It was a faith that was strengthened by making difficult decisions; choosing to follow the Lord instead of taking easier path.

The book of Hebrews sums up the difficult situation that Moses faced quite concisely when it records for us these words of the Lord, ²⁴ ***By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. ²⁵ He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time. ²⁶ He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward.*** In faith Moses made a difficult decision. Instead of enjoying the comforts of life in the courts of a Pharaoh and in the company of his false gods, Moses chose to make his home among the people of the true God. He gave up luxury upon luxury and he chose to serve his Lord.

As we consider the words from the prophet Zechariah we can add one more name to the list of those whose faith was tested and tried and made stronger through difficult situations: the apostle Peter. You might wonder what these words of the Old

Testament prophet have to do with Peter. But do you remember what Jesus said to Peter, and all the disciples, on the night that he was betrayed? Jesus quoted from the prophet Zechariah, for these words of prophecy were about him and his disciples. And so Jesus said to them, ***“This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written: (in the book of Zechariah) “I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.”³² But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee.” {Matthew 26:31,32}.***

God foretold that he would bring suffering upon his ***“shepherd, against the man who is close to me!”*** God was telling his people that the adoring crowds that would surround the Messiah would quickly vanish, when half-hearted followers got a one whiff of trouble or hardship. Think about how this was fulfilled in the life of Jesus. He was surrounded by crowds and crowds of people when he fed the five thousand. At one point when he was preaching and teaching near the Sea of Galilee the crowds were pressing upon him so much that in order to preach he had to stand in a boat and cast off from shore. When he came into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday the streets were lined with those who sang his praise. But those kinds of numbers would suddenly vanish when the shepherd would suffer. ***“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.***

And so on the night that he was betrayed, when so many had already left his side and his own precious disciples would soon abandon him, Jesus spoke the words of the prophet Zechariah. ***Strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.*** Jesus said these words to warn his disciples of his oncoming suffering and remind them of their weakness. But do you remember what Peter said in response to this word of God? ***³³ Peter replied, “Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will.”*** Even after Jesus predicted Peter’s denial, Peter upped the ante and responded with this bold claim. ***“Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.”*** The Gospel writer tells us that ***“All the other disciples said the same.”*** But just as Jesus said the disciples would desert him when trouble came. They fled into the night when Judas and the mob took Jesus.

Peter actually did fight for his Lord before he denied. Initially he was quick to defend Jesus. He cut off the ear of the high priest servant, but later he would deny him. Peter’s faith reflex was to fight for his Lord but it was quickly overcome by the reflex of the flesh to flee at the sign of trouble. Standing around the fire warming himself in the courtyard fight turned to flight. As Jesus was being put on trial Peter didn’t want to deal with the heat of having to answer for being a disciple of Jesus, so he denied him. Three times he denied him even though he had claimed he would never do such a thing.

As we look around in our world today we realize it is not that easy to be a Christian all the time. You look around and the neighbors aren’t going to church anymore. It isn’t socially prudent to make your views on certain topics known. Your friends at work or at school cut you down every time you talk about what God’s word has to say on this or that, that is, if you speak up at all. Fight slowly becomes flight. You

no longer fight for the faith and you slowly you deny Jesus. You may not call curses down on yourself and swear you don't know him, but there are times that we try to cover up our faith. It is easier not to be a Christian all the time.

After all, you don't need to take heat for your beliefs. You don't need the pressure of being singled out at school or work. It is tough enough going through life's troubles and holding on to your faith. It is tough enough to fight the everyday grind. It is tough enough to get to church when life becomes so hectic because you are trying to make ends meet. It is hard enough to face cancer and sickness, and the loss of loved one and friends. You don't need to take heat for being a Christian too.

But isn't that one way that God strengthens you? God feeds you and nourishes you with his word when you come to church. He quenches your thirsty soul with living water whenever you are in his word. That is your spiritual diet, but what about your spiritual exercise? Does God not strengthen you when you live his word in your life? Does God not strengthen you through testing and trial? Do you not know God's Word better, when you have to explain it? Do you not know better how to apply God's Word to your life, when you have to defend it, and give the reason for the hope that you have? Do you not know God's will better when you have to make difficult choices and trust in him?

You can tell a teenager over and over that sex before marriage is wrong, but when he or she is surrounded by friends who are pressuring her to change her mind and she sticks to what she knows is right, as difficult as that situation is, she is able to lean on her God and call on him in her time of need and her faith is strengthened even more than you telling her to obey. You can tell a Christian man to not seek revenge, but rather to be honest and forthright and forgive, but when that man is tested, when his name is tarnished for no good reason, when his reputation is dragged through the mud at no fault of his own; then his faith is put to the test. To avoid retribution even when his entire being says, "this is not right", to deny himself, trust in God, forgive and move on: this is a faith that is strengthened through trouble. You can tell a Christian woman to avoid the sin of greed, but when an opportunity to steal or make some quick money by dishonest gain is put in front of her, is that not an opportunity for her to put her faith into practice. She trusts her Lord and serves God and not money.

Dear friends, God puts us in these fires for our good. God challenges our faith. He puts us in situations that will test our faith, but that faith will be strengthened and purified through the fire of trials. He has us work with, and live near, and go to school with, and rub shoulders with, and live our lives with those who have values, and beliefs, and views that are very different from us so that we might be tested and strengthened. God calls us to live our faith and we are to live our lives in the real world and that is not always easy. To have a faith that is lazy, that does just enough to get by, that hangs onto sinful habits, this is not a faith that God is pleased with and so God in his wisdom, in his love, he challenges us. He tests us. He purifies our faith.

Peter was tested in the fire. This strong, almost arrogant, persona was melted down to a mess of uncontrollable sobbing when he denied his Lord. His faith was built

back up when he realized that it is the risen Lord and not his strength and guile that saves. His faith was restored when his dear Savior reinstated him on the banks of the Sea of Galilee. And then just a few weeks later God took this man of faith and purified his faith and made it shine by testing in the fire of a difficult situation. Peter's faith shone bright as pure gold when he boldly proclaimed the word of the Lord on Pentecost. On that day he spoke directly to those same leaders that killed Jesus and called them to repentance and proclaimed that there was forgiveness even for them. Repent and be baptized and wash your sin away, Peter boldly proclaimed. And when more difficulty came, when the leaders of the people wanted to run him out of town and kill him, Peter and the other apostles did not flee from potential harm. The book of Acts tells us that Peter and the other apostles actually rejoiced in this persecution. This was a faith that had been purified like silver.

The leaders had the apostles flogged for preaching and teaching the good news of Jesus and they were threaten with worse if this preaching continued. One might think that after such harsh treatment, and having narrowly escaped with their lives they would be weary and tired, worn down and ready to give up the faith; but instead this what the Scriptures tell us. ⁴¹ ***The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.*** ⁴² ***Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ. [Acts 5:24].***

And so when your faith is challenged know that God is with you. And he can use even such difficulty for your good. As we think about how God refines our faith through trouble and trial I want to leave you with an illustration that you may have heard before, but it certainly is fitting.

A woman once asked a silversmith how silver was refined. He told her that he took the unfinished metal and put it in the hottest part of the fire. The woman asked, "Aren't you afraid that it is going to get scorched." He said that he would watch it closely never taking his eyes off of the metal. He would not let it get scorched. The woman then asked, "When do you know it is done?" The silversmith replied, "When I can see my image in it?"

There will be times that God allows certain things to come into our lives to strengthen us. There will be times that God himself will put certain things in our lives that will test our faith; that will lead us to call on him, and trust in him. He does this in love. He does this for our good. He puts us in the fires of trouble and challenges to purify and refine our faith so that we trust in him. God does this so that doubt and fear melt away and he sees his image in us. It won't always be easy to be a Christian, but remember God will never take his eyes off of you. Jesus will not let you be scorched or give you more than you can bear. And when we call on his name he will answer.

Even in the midst of trials we know that LORD is our God. The same faithful LORD that was there for Joseph, the same LORD who promised to be there for Moses, the same LORD who was there to help and restore and strengthen Peter; that same LORD is our God. Amen.