

Zechariah 13:7-9

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"Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, against the man who stands next to me," declares the LORD of hosts. "Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered; I will turn my hand against the little ones. ⁸ In the whole land, declares the LORD, two thirds shall be cut off and perish, and one third shall be left alive. ⁹ And I will put this third into the fire, and refine them as one refines silver, and test them as gold is tested. They will call upon my name, and I will answer them. I will say, 'They are my people'; and they will say, 'The LORD is my God.'"

I read a book a few years ago, it was called *Where the Crawdads Sing*, written by Delia Owens, and it tells the story of a young girl named Kya who lived in the swamplands of the North Carolina coast with her dad in the 1950's. They lived there in the marshes because they were impoverished. There was not much money coming into the household, and the money that did come in, sadly, the father would spend on alcohol. And so, it was a backwards sort of life for Kya, growing in a swamp in a ramshackle hut without much in the way of hygiene or clean clothes or even any friends.

Meanwhile, in nearby Barkley Cove, the townspeople were generally well-to-do. The parents all had jobs, the children all wore new clothes, and folks drove around fancy new cars. And it comes about in the book that young Kya starts going to school in town there in Barkley Cove, and as you might guess, she sticks out like a sore thumb. She's there in her threadbare clothing, worn-out shoes, dirty and with disheveled hair, and the other children all look well put together. And as children will sometimes do, the well-off children ridiculed her and made fun of her. They called her "Marsh Girl," because, well, one look at her and you knew she was one of those poor folks from the marshes.

And that's the way it is in life, isn't it? You can easily identify the people that come from greater financial means because they often have nicer clothes, newer shoes, fancy cars; meanwhile, the people that live in the cash-strapped families are forced to stretch everything to their limits. It's the disparity between the haves and the have-nots. You just don't see rich kids growing up in threadbare clothing or poor kids growing up with all the fineries of life. Or do you see just that?

The writer of Psalm 73 was a man named Asaph, and he saw just that playing out in his own life. You see, he knew that he was a child of the Heavenly Father, the one true God in whose possession belongs all things, and he also knew that many other people were children of the wicked, cruel world. And yet he observed in that Psalm: ***"I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. ⁴ For they have no pangs until death; their bodies are fat and sleek. ⁵ They are not in trouble as others are; they are not stricken like the rest of mankind. . . . ¹² Behold, these are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches."*** (Psalm 73:3-5, 12)

It bothered Asaph to no end to think that he was a child of the God of Heaven and earth, He was the one with the wealthy Father, and yet it was those who were the wicked children of this world that seemed to be at ease, living a life of prosperity! There was something wrong with this picture! It seemed backwards! Does that sort of thing ever bother you? You look around you and see the people who haven't a care for God also seem to not have a care in the world, their lives are filled with blessings and good things. Meanwhile, you are a child of God, and yet your life is filled with so many stressors. And when you are in distress over these things, do you ever find yourself wondering if you are in fact God's child? Because if that's the case, what's going on here? Why's our life so hard?

I'm going to let you in on a little secret. If an easy life was all it really took to know for certain that God was your dear Father and you His dear children—if that's what it took—you'd never be certain! You'd always be thinking life could be better, leaving that doubt in your mind that perhaps you don't belong to God after all. So, where can we find this sort of confidence that God is indeed our Father and that He considers us His children? Another way to ask this question is in the words of our theme:

How Do I Know "The Lord is MY God?"

- I. He redeems me
- II. He refines me
- III. He reclaims me

Do you know where Zechariah is positioned in Old Testament history? He lived in Judah about 500 years before Jesus, and He was a prophet of God for the people who had *returned* from captivity in Babylon in order to rebuild their homeland. Of course, you know about the Southern tribes of Israel being carried away by the Babylonians. It was in Babylon that we come across Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego, and the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar. The people had almost entirely turned away from the Lord to serve other gods, and so God had allowed Nebuchadnezzar to wipe out Jerusalem, destroy the temple, and carry the people away as his captives. But God didn't forget His people. He sent many prophets, including Jeremiah who gave a message from God that after 70 years in captivity, the people would return home. And, lo and behold, after 70 years, the Persians conquered the Babylonians, and King Cyrus of Persia sent the Israelites back to Judah to rebuild.

So that's the situation in which we find both Zechariah and the people he's preaching to. They'd returned to rebuild, and they were certain, at least initially, that God loved and cared for them. And *then* they started to have some problems. They were trying to rebuild Solomon's fabulous temple there in Jerusalem, but they were doing so on a shoestring budget. It wasn't going to be the same. They were also trying to bring security to the whole project by first rebuilding the walls around Jerusalem to keep themselves safe from their hostile neighbors. And yet at the same time, those hostile neighbors kept attacking and killing them. In fact, in the book of Nehemiah, we find out that the people who were rebuilding the walls did so with a trowel in one hand in order to spread the mortar for the bricks, while in the other hand they held a sword to be ready to fight at a moment's notice. With all of these problems arising, that initial certainty of God's love started to fade, and they had to wonder, "*Why is this happening if we are God's children and He our Father?*" Those enemy nations were prosperous and well-off, they hadn't been carried away from their homes, they weren't trying to rebuild their lives. But the people of God were! "*There's something wrong with this picture!*"

So, God sent Zechariah, to let the people know that while *they* were so focused on the here-and-now and the problems they were currently facing, God had the big picture in mind. While they had formerly had worthless shepherds, namely wicked kings, who had led them astray, God was preparing them so that He could send another Shepherd. A Good Shepherd. He's described by God as "***my shepherd. . . the man who stands next to me.***" This new leader would come from the right hand of the Father in Heaven, and of course, that's Jesus. So no, God was not ignoring them, God Himself would come to their aid! While these people were so focused on their problems, God was preparing to send One who would take care of all of their problems, once and for all.

And, it's shocking, then, to see how God would treat this shepherd, ***"Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, against the man who stands next to me," declares the LORD of hosts. "Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered."*** And yes, we know that Good Shepherd was, in fact, struck down. It was God's own doing. And in this way, the Lord would redeem His people. That is, sacrifice His own dear Son in order to pay the price for the sin and guilt for all sinners for all time. It's just as Isaiah had written a couple hundred years prior: ***"All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all."*** (Isaiah 53:6)

And so, through the prophet Zechariah, the Lord was telling His people, ***"Do not doubt me on this. You may face many troubles, but none can compare to the trouble My own dear Son will face. He will depart from my side and fully pay so that you may be blameless. And in this you will know that you are my people and that I am your God."***

Yes, we, too, are the children of God, and sometimes it might seem like we're walking around in rags, while the godless world around us enjoys a life of pleasure. And that can really cause us to doubt our Heavenly Father, because what child of a wealthy person walks around in threadbare clothing! Well, here's the only assurance you need to *know* what God thinks towards you—He did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all. (cf. Romans 8:32) We know He's *our* God because **He redeems us**. In this, we have been given real wealth, generational wealth; here we find ***"treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal."*** (Matthew 6:20)

But what about while we're still on earth? What life can we expect here while we live as Children of God? Well, if one were a little bit naïve, you might assume that having been fully redeemed by God, being blameless before Him through His Son, that immediately you would enjoy a life of ease and comfort—that all trouble and sorrow would vanish! And if you assumed that, you'd be wrong. Because, God spoke through the Prophet to say there would be plenty of trouble and sorrow for Children of God as they make their way to life eternal. He writes, ***"In the whole land, declares the LORD, two thirds shall be cut off and perish, and one third shall be left alive. And I will put this third into the fire, and refine them as one refines silver, and test them as gold is tested."***

There's two groups being spoken of here. After the shepherd is struck down, there would be some (2/3rds) who would not believe Him, and they would be struck down too, in judgment. But then there's a remnant, the one third who would believe, who would escape judgment as the blameless Children of God. What would life be like for them? Again, ***"I will put this third into the fire, and refine them as one refines silver, and test them as gold is tested."*** God is describing us here, saying that we will escape death, destined for glory with our Father in Heaven, and yet we'll be brought to heaven through the fire. We'll face troubles and trials and sorrows, just as our Savior endured on his way to the cross. And it will be painful many times, but God allows it to be painful. Which means that as we observe that we are the ones with the wealthy Father in Heaven, we also are the ones with the threadbare clothing. It doesn't make much sense, but this is by God's good design. He has a purpose.

God does all this **to refine us**. So often, we think of God's ongoing work in our lives being that He gives us what we need and takes care of us. And that's true. But let's not forget that He sometimes takes away, and this is to care for us as well. If we remember this, then we can find the answer to

some nagging questions that perhaps we've had, or perhaps we've heard asked of us. Questions like these: "If God is all-loving and all-powerful, why are such terrible things happening in the world today?" "If God is all-powerful and all-loving, why does He allow me to go through such difficult trials and troubles?" "If He's all loving and all powerful, why do wicked people seem to do their evil deeds and get away with it?" There are answers to these questions. They begin with the Good Shepherd.

Because it was for you, personally, that the Father said, "**Strike the Shepherd and the sheep will be scattered.**" We know that this Shepherd did not walk to His death blindly, but willingly for you. And with His death and resurrection, you are redeemed, which means that God has no judgment left in His for you, but instead, only grace. Knowing this, your life should be one episode of joy after another. Every day should be filled with the triumphant procession of knowing that "*I'm God's child on my way to eternal life.*" All your words and actions should be a thank you to God for this great redemption.

But in our sorrows, our days are often filled with darker thoughts. Stress and trouble darken our days, and we lose sight of God's plans for us. But there is an answer at hand for the reason that God is using these crosses. Zechariah puts his finger on it in verse 9: "**And I will put this third into the fire, and refine them as one refines silver, and test them as gold is tested. They will call upon my name, and I will answer them.**" God will use even trial and hardship and heartache in your life, in order to drive you to Him in prayer, and your faith will be increased as He delivers you. *That's* the refinement process. The Apostle Peter explains this for us, "**Now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith-- more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire-- may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.**" (1 Peter 1:6) God has a purpose in all this pain; His purpose is to bring you through it, through the fire, to a life of glory and honor in heaven. And every trouble that makes you rely on Him more, is working *for* you.

Now, I don't claim to understand in any grief or sorrow *how* God's purposes work, and I know that people sometimes face unexplainable trouble and hardship, but God is calling on you to trust that *He* knows, and that *He* will make good on His promise as He always does. The way I see it, there are three responses we could give when God sends His purifying fire. We could let it *destroy* us. To give up all hope for the future, to give up on God entirely. We could let it *define* us—for the rest of our days be obsessed with the pain we've suffered. Or we can let the fire *develop* us—help us to learn to surrender our will to God's will, knowing that His will is to see us in heaven. Knowing that, we also then know that everything that happens will serve that goal.

You see, God's plan in **redeeming** you, in **refining** you, is so that He can **reclaim** you from sin and death to draw you to Himself. All of this so that the end of our text comes true for you. "**They will call upon my name, and I will answer them. I will say, 'They are my people'; and they will say, 'The LORD is my God.'**" So, listen, you don't call on some generic god, the "man upstairs." No, you have the privilege of knowing who the Good Shepherd is, so you can say, "**The LORD! The LORD is MY God.**" Or you can say, in the words of the Psalmist: "**The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.**" (Psalm 18:2) May God grant it to each of us, in Jesus' name. Amen. "**And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.**" (Philippians 4:7)