

Over the next several weeks we'll hear God's answer to the question: What's life like for a follower of Christ? First answer up on our list is: Expect Persecution.

One of you might say to me: "Pastor, how about something a little more positive. What if we have a first time visitor who is investigating Christianity? Won't this topic scare them off?" I'd suggest: If we get an audience with them long enough to really set the issue out before them, this is a great topic with which to begin. I say that because... it gets to the heart of a question voiced so many times from those outside Christianity looking in. And rightly so. Persecution is all over the Bible. In fact it's all over the world!

3 teenage girls, walking to their Christian school in Indonesia, walked into an ambush and were beheaded. Sudanese Christian children who have seen their homes destroyed and their families murdered have been enslaved by enemies to Christianity. Gulags of North Korea and prisons of Iran, China and other countries are populated with Christians who are sentenced simply for their Christian faith.

Persecution arises from within the church too. Unmeasureable – sometimes unspoken – damage has occurred from false teachers who serve their own appetites (2 Peter 2; Romans 16:18). Pastors or church leaders, who in their greed have ravaged the flock rather than feed them, have brought unjust criticism and cast unfavorable light on the name of Christ. The faith of many has been challenged and stumbling blocks have been thrown up in the way of others.

You can boil the question down to one word: Why? Why does the Lord allow his little flock to face such difficulty, affliction and pain from persecution? This is a difficult question. And it's good to face it honestly, openly and directly.

Zechariah 13:7-9 provides us with an excellent opportunity to take up this question. Let's be guided by our God to his answer.

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 [literally: **upon**] 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.' "

Verse 7 gives us a violent start... Someone is being struck with a sword. Sheep – the Lord's people – are being scattered. "See?!", the objection may come, "Is the ultimate answer to the persecution question: God just doesn't care that much about His people?"

Take a closer look at the one being struck. Who is this? Someone close to the LORD Almighty. Who could be closer to the Father than the Son? This is Jesus.

Our Lord Jesus himself on the night he was betrayed and abandoned, told his disciples ahead of time what would happen to him, and what their reaction would be: "This very night you will all fall away... for it is written: 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered'" (Matthew 26:31-32). Just as verse seven here in Zechariah ch.13 tells us.

Why Jesus, God the Son? You could never find a better person who ever walked the face of the earth. [He, after all, alone is perfect.] He certainly didn't deserve what he received. We know why he was struck - the whip upon his back, the nails piercing through his hands and feet, all on the way to his death.

If times of intense difficulty are described with the metaphor "walking through the fire" (and they have been described that way at least as far back as 700 B.C. – Isaiah 43:2)... then, Jesus faced the most intense fire walk of anyone! And you know why, if you know the central message of this book.

It was to spare *us* from hell. Our God cares that much about us.

We know what we've been. We know the ways we have been unfaithful traitors to our God. We confessed it earlier in the church service. We know we don't deserve anything from Him except hell itself.

But God, in an amazing act of love, put himself through the cruelest form of persecution ever ~ hell itself ~ on a darkened hill, on a rugged cross. Here ~ as God prophesied through Zechariah: the Father allowed his hand of justice to strike His Son, the Shepherd- the Savior – the Substitute.

Why would God plan such a thing to happen to his own Son? To "one who is close" to him? Wow! Why did God the Son allow it to happen upon himself?

The answer is as simple as a hymn line children can easily recite: "He only could unlock the gate of heaven and let us in." That's what he gives to all believers.

This is the foundational truth of our faith. Every other truth in Scripture will find its place when set upon this firm, unshakeable foundation.

So what about the answer to persecution? If he loves us that much, why does he allow us to go through persecution still? What's the point? Is there any point? Is it because we must have to suffer at least *something* for our sin? Is that maybe what the end of vs.7 is about?

Let's look back there. The NIV translation, "**I will turn my hand against the little ones,**" can cause one to mistakenly think: "That sounds like maybe... when we face persecution we're being punished." You might have heard earlier how I read one word differently in vs.7. The Hebrew preposition in the last phrase literally means "upon the little ones." Such a "hand upon" can be to inflict harm or to provide care. Which one do you think it is in this case? The Lord places his hand upon his sheep, his children, to provide care. The NIV has the wrong translation here.

We believers in Jesus Christ – are given the news: we have our Lord's hand of peace upon us. "For Christ died for sins once for all the righteous for the unrighteous to bring you to God." 1 Peter 3:18

Yes, our resurrected Lord's hand is upon us. Jesus on the night before his death went on to tell his disciples: "After I have been struck dead, I will arise. And I will go ahead of you into Galilee." You see his assurance to them: he would come back, he would appear to them, he would speak his word of forgiveness & restoration to them, he would leave them with his promise of his personal care for them every day of their lives. And that is exactly what we hear in Zechariah 13:7: "The Lord's hand returned upon his little ones" – and remained resting upon them, upon us.

So, contrary to how things may look on the surface, when we face hardships that may cause someone to question the Lord, we instead have overwhelming evidence of his love. A love that surpasses human understanding.

That *helps us put into perspective* the more specific question we're looking at today – how does the truth of an almighty, loving God, fit together with the reality that he allows his people to face persecution, of types so severe, difficult and painful?

From within the Christian Church we may still ask, as we grow in our understanding: I get that persecution is not because God doesn't care. I get that persecution is not that we need to be punished in any way for our sins, since God already punished his Son in our place. But what then *is* the point of persecution in God's good plans for us?

Look again at Zechariah ~ specifically at **vs. 8-9**. Who are the 2/3? Who are the 1/3?

The 2/3 stands for all those walking through life in the darkness of unbelief. Since they reject the Savior, they reject the only way to Heaven. If they remain in their present spiritual state, they will perish. Jesus said: wide is the gate & broad the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it (Matthew 7:13).

Believers are the 1/3. They don't receive the striking hand that the 2/3 receive from the Lord. Instead, the Lord's refining hand is upon us. Hear in that description an answer to the "why" God allows us to face persecution.

Our God truly understands the extent of danger and the deadliness of sin which creeps into every corner of our world, including within the church and within our own souls.

He will do anything to keep us focused on him.

We already discussed the heart of the Refiner: His loving goal is to bring about our eternal good – purifying out harmful elements in our lives and in us, drawing us closer to his Word, leading us to a stronger/confirmed trust in him, establishing us in the healthy pattern of calling on him & knowing he'll answer our every call...

And yet, in spite of making that so clear. . . How do you - how do I - sometimes react to God's refinement process? We're not too different from the 11 disciples. Following Jesus' arrest, they scattered! They hid in fear! Do a little soul searching, and ask: which one of us, when faced with persecution – or the threat of opposition of some sort – has ever been weak? Has run for cover in a direction away from the Lord and His Word? We modern day disciples certainly display doubts and weaknesses strikingly parallel to the disciples in Jesus' day. We don't always understand what God is doing, or why God is allowing something.

But God is always faithful, even when His ways don't make sense to us. He says, "My ways are higher than your ways, and my thoughts higher than your thoughts. As high as the heavens are above the earth, so are my thoughts higher than your thoughts and my ways than your ways" [Isaiah 55:8-9]. The greatest being... his forgiveness that is new for us every morning, freely given to us in Jesus. I'm so thankful we have the assurance of his gift of forgiveness through faith in Jesus!!

On the other side of Easter the Lord looked for his followers. He extended his hands to his disciples, along with his Word of peace. This changed everything for them. Forgiven, strengthened, they now stood in the temple courts and proclaimed the forgiveness and peace they had in Jesus. The Lord had carried them through their difficulty and refined them.

The history of the New Testament Church is the story of little ones with the Savior's hand upon them. Upon us! The Shepherd-Savior's hand upon us to care for us – to carry us, to refine us. The same beautiful, blessed outcome is being worked for us as our Shepherd's hand is upon us.

So let's turn the persecution question on its head. Consider it an honor to face persecution for Christ. In fact,

- “consider it pure joy,” we're told in the book of James, “whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance... Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised” (1:2-2,12). And in the end, isn't that all that matters!
- “Rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. ... if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name” (1 Peter 4:13-16).
- “Don't be anxious about anything, but by prayer and petition present your requests to God.” (Phil.4)

After all, as Zechariah records, our God says: “They will call on my name, and I will answer them. I will say, ‘They are my people.’” And we say, “the Lord is our God.”

“Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you.” (2 Thes. 3:16) Amen.