**What Next? – the Shepherd and His flock**

Text: Zechariah 13:7-9

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**Scriptures:** Matt 26:31-35; Zechariah 13:7-9

**Series: Zechariah**. Sermon 17 of 19 {occasion – public professions of faith}

**Theme:** God promises to strike his own shepherd, causing the sheep to be scattered and his own people to be tested and refined

**FCF:** We may think that following Jesus is easy

**Proposition:** Following the Good Shepherd brings both suffering and comfort

Points:

1. The Shepherd is struck

2. His Sheep are refined

3. His covenant is confirmed

**Introduction**

Opening question to those who have recently professed their faith – what do you expect to happen now? What is being a publicly committed Christian going to be like in the future? In other words, **what next?**

When we are familiar with the church we can miss the wonder of what God is doing in her. When we are familiar with the Bible we can think we’ve fully seen the riches of our Lord’s grace. When we are familiar with the truth about Jesus our view of who He is can be too small. Familiarity can breed…. contempt.

Today we have before us a less familiar part of the Scriptures: Zechariah 13:7-9. These words give perhaps the clearest picture of Christ and his church in the Old Testament.

**1. The Shepherd is Struck (7a)**

Recently I visited the World War 1 exhibitions at Te Papa and the War Memorial museums in Wellington. In the pictures of the blood, sweat and muck of trench warfare I was confronted with the brutality of close combat. When the New Zealanders launched a night-time attack to take Chunuk Bair, no shots were fired, the enemy was killed at close quarters with swords mounted on rifles: bayonets. You cannot come away from a war museum without being reminded that warfare is a bloody, violent and frequently fatal activity.

The first part of our text speaks of such violence: *"Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, against the man who is close to me!" declares the LORD Almighty”.* Here God strikes his own chosen Shepherd! (Matt 26:31-35; Mark 14:27-31; Luke 22:31-34). He comes against the ruler, protector and provider for his own people. We might have expected divine judgement upon the three false shepherds of 11:8 or the foolish shepherd of 11:15-17, but this is the Lord’s shepherd; the one who belongs to God, who acts for God.

‘Belongs to God’ is not quite right. The idea here is of intimate association, rather than possession. The words ‘close to me’ literally mean “my fellow, my blood associate, my close family relation”. These words do not seem to make sense. Why would God bring a sword against a person very close to Him? For the Anzacs only meters away from their enemies in the trenches we understand such close personal combat; but this is an attack against a familial close relation.

The ‘sword’ here is both a metaphor of judgement and of physical harm. We saw this in Zechariah 11:7 “Woe to the worthless shepherd, who deserts the flock! May the sword strike his arm”. Here it is not only the ‘arm’, or the ‘eye’ of the shepherd which is in view, but his very life. “Strike the shepherd’ conveys the idea of a single deadly blow, such as would occur in the midst of a battle. It is the Lord Almighty, literally ‘the Lord of armies’ who strikes this fatal blow against his own shepherd. This is the same ‘sword strike’ that we heard about in the previous chapter when God says: **Zechariah 12:10b** *" They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son”*

Put this all together and what is the Lord saying through his prophet here? God himself will be killed. He will be pierced. Life blood will flow unto death. The life of His chosen shepherd will be physically and violently taken in an act of God’s judgement. This shepherd is a man who is in a close family relationship with God.

Imagine for a moment that you had never read the New Testament. You had never heard anything about Jesus, the Christ. Put the familiar aside…you’re hearing or reading these words of prophecy for the first time: God himself will be killed. The life of His chosen shepherd will be physically and violently taken in an act of God’s judgement. This shepherd is a man who is in a close family relationship with God.

It seems to make no sense. How can a person be both God and man? How can the shepherd both be God and also be in a close family relationship with God? Why would God violently take his own life, which is simultaneously the life of a close relation?

This is the greatest of all puzzles, riddles, mysteries; the revelation of which was explained, ‘unpacked’ in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Jesus is The God-man, born of the virgin Mary, Immanuel, ‘God with us’. Jesus is The Son of God who is in the perfect, closest, purest, loving familial relationship with God the Father. Jesus is The Good Shepherd who lays down His life for His sheep. Jesus is The Lamb of God who is slain because God made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us.

These words from ‘of old’, this prophecy from Zechariah, foretells God the Father striking his own Son, in our place! Brother and sister in Christ…the sword of God’s wrath pierced Jesus through, struck Him down, for you! When you publicly professed your faith, you are effectively saying “that should have been me!”. I deserved the ‘sword’ of God’s judgement. I should be violently struck down.

The book of Zechariah is unfamiliar to many of us, at least it was until we started this preaching series! Here in this often-unread part of the OT, we find the gospel that we are familiar with being expressed in less well-known words.

The core message of the whole Bible is contained in this verse. Do not let your familiarity of church, Scripture and gospel take away from the impact of this truth. At the Gallipoli exhibition in Wellington, I understood the brutality of war more clearly than I had done before. I had forgotten the price that had been paid by others for my present liberty in the western world.

The shed blood of Jesus, who died so that others may live and have freedom forever, is prophesied in our text: *"Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, against the man who is close to me!" declares the LORD Almighty”*

Perhaps you are someone this morning who does not know who Jesus is? It could be that you are not familiar with the truth about Him? Look here and you can see Jesus! He is God’s only Son, the Good Shepherd, beloved by His Father, struck down, pierced through, crucified, in the place of people like you and me who deserve the judgement which came upon Him. If you believe this, you are one of his sheep. We know that because the Shepherd said: “*My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand*” (John 10:27b-28)

Now we can answer the question: ‘what next?’

**2. His Sheep are refined (7b-9a)**

Ruling kings, presidents and prime ministers live and travel in security ‘bubbles’ formed by body-guards, armour-plated cars, motorcades, pre-arranged locations with heavy surveillance and restricted access. Why? Because if the head of state is assassinated, the country is destabilised, and the people may panic in the resulting turmoil and chaos. This scenario is pictured in our text: *"Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered, and I will turn my hand against the little ones. In the whole land," declares the LORD, "two-thirds will be struck down and perish; yet one-third will be left in it”.* Kill the shepherd and the sheep no longer have guidance, care and protection. They are no longer gathered together for their safety and can no longer follow their leader as a flock.

Jesus predicted that his disciples would desert him when he was betrayed and arrested. He said on the Mount of Olives: "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*' (Matthew 26:31). We know that although Peter protested at these words, he denied knowing Jesus three times that same night. The frightened disciples dispersed.

A few decades after the violent execution of Jesus, the true King of the Jews, many descendants of Abraham died as the Roman army brutally suppressed a Jewish revolt in AD70. The temple in Jerusalem was destroyed and those who did not perish were scattered throughout the gentile nations. The Shepherd was struck and his followers were dispersed, proclaiming the gospel as they went.

Perhaps you’re wondering about the phase ‘I will turn my hand against the little ones’. The meaning is unclear. It could refer either to judgement as the word ‘against’ implies. However, this word also has sense of ‘upon’ indicating protection of some ‘lambs’ in order to preserve a remnant. The prophesy continues: *In the whole land," declares the LORD, "two-thirds will be struck down and perish; yet one-third will be left in it. This third I will bring into the fire; I will refine them like silver and test them like gold.*

These words predict a separation of peoples with the majority (a symbolic two thirds) perishing and a minority, a remnant (symbolically one third) remaining in the land. These words speak of the sheep of the stuck shepherd sharing in his suffering.

So, brothers and sister… What next?

Answer: it’s going to be difficult. You’re most likely going to feel the heat! Don’t be alarmed. You move forward in the pathway of those who have followed Jesus before you.

The 2nd-century [Church Father](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church_Father) [Tertullian](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tertullian) once famously wrote that "the blood of martyrs is the seed of the [Church](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian_Church)". He meant that when Christians willingly [sacrifice](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sacrifice) their lives this often leads to the [conversion](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religious_conversion) of others. The call to profess Christ and live out that profession is a call to suffer, to be willing to die. It is a call to give a costly witness of life in Jesus to a dying world. The way of the Christian is a narrow upward path. John Bunyan in Pilgrim’s Progress wrote of the ‘Hill Difficulty’.

Jesus told it how it is when he said: "*If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it*” (Luke 9:23-24). God’s people suffer along with Jesus, their Shepherd; not to gain their salvation, but as part of the pathway of following their King.

This prophecy describes a fire which awaits the Shepherd’s sheep. Here’s the good news! It is not a fire of judgement, nor a fire of destruction, but a purifying fire. The image of a refining fire was a familiar one in the ancient world. Valuable metals like silver and gold were heated beyond melting point so that impurities could be separated out, having floated to the surface to be scrapped away and removed. As Christ, the Good Shepherd proves the faith of His followers he uses trials, trouble and tribulation to do so. Difficulty in life brings heat to bear and what we believe about our Lord and Saviour is put to the test.

The heat of trouble forces us to ask the question: has my familiarity with Jesus, bred a contempt, a complacency, a ‘cotton-wool comfort’ which contaminates me with worldliness?

The Apostle Peter writes to Christ’s suffering sheep, describing them as “God's elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia” (1 Peter 1:1) Peter writes about the trials they face, explaining (1 Peter 1:7): “*These have come so that your faith-- of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire-- may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed*”

Our Lord lovingly uses suffering to assist in spiritual cleansing, the continuing removing of impurities, of ungodly characteristics, of selfish ambitions, of sinful appetites, of a love for the world.

So what next fellow follower of Christ?

Jesus promises that as long as you remain alive on this earth, you will be refined, you will suffer, you will become more like the One who suffered so much more for you.

Are you ready for the heat? Perhaps you’re wondering if professing your faith really was such a smart idea? Let me assure and encourage you. It was the right thing for you to do. **2 Cor 1:5** “*For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows*”

The promise of refining heat is followed by the very best news…3rd point

3. **His covenant is confirmed (v9b)**

The Shepherd is struck down. He dies. He comes back to life. He’s with the early disciples for 40 days and then he leaves again, being lifted up bodily from the earth until a cloud takes him out of their sight! Jesus has left his followers scattered over the globe, some being martyred for their faith, others suffering, not just as part of a groaning creation, but suffering specifically because they belong to him.

With an outlook like this, why would anybody in their right mind want to follow Jesus? Because the Shepherd remains with his sheep whom he loves! His close relationship with those who follow him is not broken as his people are refined but strengthened.

At the end of our text we see another part of the answer to the question: what next? You have likely heard about the covenant from the pulpit, in catechism classes, and at baptisms. The term ‘covenant’ is very familiar many/most of us. We know that a covenant is a binding agreement between two or more parties.

We know that God promised to be God to his special, chosen, covenant people long ago when He spoke to Abraham. The words at the end of our text speak of this covenant: *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.*'"

Notice that there is two-way communication here between God and His people. The professing Christian calls on the name of the Lord, together with the church (note the plural – ‘they’). God responds to the church as a whole ‘They are my people’.

Brother and sister in our Lord, Jesus is with you! Through Christ, God Himself, is available to you for immediate 24x7 access. Zechariah prophesies this blessing and benefit of Christ which is yours! Here is open dialogue, conversation, relationship, with God Himself! Promised to you both as individuals and to us as a church! As we worship the Lord, as we praise and pray together we confirm that ‘The Lord is our God’. This is our public profession of faith as a church. We proclaim Christ, the Good Shepherd, struck by the wrath of God against our sins. We proclaim that we consider it all joy when we meet trials of various kinds because we know that the testing of our faith in the refining fire of suffering develops perseverance. We proclaim that in Christ we call on the name of the Lord and he answers us.

In Christ, our God says, 'They are my people,’ and we say, 'The LORD is our God.'"

AMEN