

Chapter 67

God's Little Ones Tried by Fire

“Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, and against the man *that is* my fellow, saith the LORD of hosts: smite the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered: and I will turn mine hand upon the little ones. And it shall come to pass, *that* in all the land, saith the LORD, two parts therein shall be cut off *and* die; but the third shall be left therein. And I will bring the third part through the fire, and will refine them as silver is refined, and will try them as gold is tried: they shall call on my name, and I will hear them: I will say, *It is* my people: and they shall say, The LORD *is* my God.”
(Zechariah 13:7-9)

God's ways are not our ways; and his thoughts are not our thoughts. Those words are applicable to all things; but when they were given in the prophecy of Isaiah, they were given in connection with God's great work of saving sinners.

“Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the LORD, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts *are* not your thoughts, neither *are* your ways my ways, saith the LORD. For *as* the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.” (Isaiah 55:7-9)

In Zechariah 13:7-9 the prophet Zechariah declares to us God's way of saving his elect, the method of his grace by which he gathers his

chosen to himself, giving them life and faith in Christ by the mighty operations of his omnipotent, effectual saving mercy. Truly, his ways are not our ways and his thoughts are not our thoughts. When God turns his hand upon his little ones and brings them to Christ, he brings them through the fire.

Shepherd Smitten

“Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, and against the man that is my fellow, saith the LORD of hosts: smite the shepherd.” — The Lord Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, laid down his life for his sheep. He willingly laid down his life for us. But let us never imagine that his death was anything less than the violent slaughter of divine justice. When he who knew no sin was made sin for us, the sword of divine justice was awakened against him with all the fury of an angry, offended God! We cannot begin to imagine the infinite magnitude of his sufferings and agony as he endured all the hell of God’s wrath against sin as our Substitute. He was engulfed in thick darkness, as darkness covered the earth. Our Redeemer’s cries from the cross, as he was abandoned by his Father, give us some sense of that which he suffered for us.

“My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? *why art thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring?* O my God, I cry in the daytime, but thou hearest not; and in the night season, and am not silent...But I *am* a worm, and no man; a reproach of men, and despised of the people...I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint: my heart is like wax; it is melted in the midst of my bowels.”(Psalms 22:1, 2, 6; 14))

“For innumerable evils have compassed me about: mine iniquities have taken hold upon me, so that I am not able to look up; they are more than the hairs of mine head: therefore my heart faileth me.” (Psalms 40:12)

“O God, thou knowest my foolishness; and my sins are not hid from thee.” (Psalms 69:5)

“Much we talk of Jesus’ blood;
But how little’s understood!
Of His sufferings, so intense,
Angels have no perfect sense!

Who can rightly comprehend
Their beginning, or their end?
‘Tis to God, and God alone,
That their weight is fully known.

See the suffering Son of God
Panting, groaning, sweating blood! —
Boundless depths of love divine!
Jesus, what a love was Thine!

Though the wonders Thou hast done
Are as yet so little known
Here we fix, and comfort take:
Jesus died for sinners’ sake!”

Who can wonder that the sheep were scattered, when the Shepherd was smitten in such horrid darkness and fury? What grief, what confusion, what terror must have filled their hearts and minds! And they were but poor, weak sheep. But notice, when the Lord God

declares, — *“Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, and against the man that is my fellow, saith the LORD of hosts: smite the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered,”* his next word is as full of mercy as his waken sword was full of fury. — *“And I will turn mine hand upon the little ones.”*

God’s Hand Turned

“And I will turn mine hand upon the little ones.” — What grace! What goodness! What mercy! — *“And I will turn mine hand upon the little ones.”* The Lord God speaks with utmost tenderness regarding his elect, his *“little ones.”* He is talking about his little lambs, his little children, his little flock. They are a people who are little in the eyes of men, and little in their own eyes before him. How we rejoice when we hear the Lord Jesus say, *“Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom”* (Luke 12:32). He often spoke of his tender care and faithful protection of these *“little ones.”*

“And whosoever shall give to drink unto one of these little ones a cup of cold *water* only in the name of a disciple, verily I say unto you, he shall in no wise lose his reward” (Matthew 10:42).

“But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and *that* he were drowned in the depth of the sea...Even so it is not the will of your Father which is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish”(Matthew 18:6, 14).

Upon these little ones the Lord God turns his hand, not his hand of justice, which was laid on Christ (It would have been unjust

to have laid it both upon the sinner and upon his Surety.), but his hand of grace and mercy, power and protection, security and preservation is turned upon his “*little ones*,” because his hand of justice was turned upon his Son. And no man can pluck one of these “*little ones*” out of his hand. As surely as God laid upon the Lord Jesus his hand of infinite justice, even so surely he lays his hand of infinite grace upon these “*little ones*” for whom Christ died. It is upon these “*little ones*” that the God of all grace has turned his hand of providence to do them good.

A Third Part

God’s “*little ones*” are his elect remnant, here referred to as “*the third part*” of the inhabitants of the earth, that must and shall be saved. They must and shall be saved because God chose them in everlasting love and Christ died for them upon the cursed tree! — “*And it shall come to pass, that in all the land, saith the LORD, two parts therein shall be cut off and die; but the third shall be left therein*” (v. 8).

I have a dear friend whose business is remnants. He buys remnants from factories at bargain prices, because they are useless to the factories. He then sells his remnants to thrifty housewives at bargain prices, because thrifty housewives are always happy to use what wealthy people throw away. With men, a remnant is something left over, for which there is no plan, purpose, or use. Remnants are a nuisance, which must be disposed of; but my friend only deals in remnants. He is always seeking remnants. Remnants are his treasure. He built his house with remnants.

The God of all grace is very much like my friend. He seeks a remnant. He only deals with a remnant. He builds his house with a remnant. His treasure is a remnant. Let me show you five things about that remnant.

1. **There is a remnant according to the election of grace** (Romans 11:5). God has not chosen to save all men. But there is a remnant, chosen from among the ruins of Adam's fallen race who must be saved (Ephesians. 1:3-6; John 10:16).
2. **Everything God does he does for his remnant.** All men benefit from God's goodness to his remnant. His works are upon all. Rain, sunshine, peace, and pestilence, draught, darkness, and war come upon all men alike; but they come for and belong to the remnant (1 Corinthians 3:21).
3. **God allows others to live on his earth for a time, because he is longsuffering toward the remnant** (2 Peter 3:9). Were it not for God's elect remnant, he would have destroyed the world in his wrath long ago, like Sodom and Gomorrah. God's elect are truly the salt, the preservers, of the earth. As he spared Adam for Abel's sake and Sodom for Lot's sake, God spares the world today for his elect's sake, that they all might be saved.
4. **God's remnant in this world is always small and feeble.** He says, "*the remnant shall be very small and feeble*" (Isaiah 16:14). In the end they will be a great multitude that no man can number; but in this world God's people are always a very small minority, a "*third part*" (Revelation 16:19). They are the few in Sardis who have not defiled their garments. They are the hundred and forty-four thousand who will stand with Christ, and by him, on Mount Zion, being redeemed from among men (Revelation 3:4; 14:1,4).
5. **God will save his elect remnant.** — "*A remnant shall be saved*" (Romans 9:27, 11:26). Not one of that great remnant

for whom God made, rules, and disposes of this world shall be lost. God the Father loved them. God the Son redeemed them. God the Spirit calls them. And God, by his great grace, will preserve them unto life everlasting.

The Fire

The hand of God that is turned upon these little ones to save them, we are told, will do so by bringing them through the fire. — *“And I will bring the third part through the fire, and will refine them as silver is refined, and will try them as gold is tried: they shall call on my name, and I will hear them: I will say, It is my people: and they shall say, The LORD is my God.”*

It is written, *“We must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God”* (Acts 14:22). All who wash their robes and make them white in the blood of the Lamb must come through great tribulation (Revelation 7:14). They must pass through the fire and be *“refined as silver is refined”* and tried *“as gold is tried.”* Remember, this passage is describing God’s mercy not his wrath, his grace not his judgment. Zechariah is here telling us about that which God does for chosen, redeemed sinners when he turns his hand upon them to save them. He refines them with fire. Isaiah wrote...

“For my name’s sake will I defer mine anger, and for my praise will I refrain for thee, that I cut thee not off. Behold, I have refined thee, but not with silver; I have chosen thee in the furnace of affliction. For mine own sake, even for mine own sake, will I do it: for how should my name be polluted? and I will not give my glory unto another” (Isaiah 48:9-11).

If you want to see God’s elect in this world, look for them in the fire. Look for them in the burning and fiery furnace. If you walk

with God, you must walk through the fire. When God confirmed his covenant to Abraham (Genesis 15:8-18), he gave him three things, by which he assured his servant of grace: (1.) an altar of sacrifice – representing blood atonement, (2.) a burning lamp – representing the guiding light of his Word and Spirit, and (3.) a smoking furnace – representing the refining fire. And it is by these three things that God confirms his covenant to his elect in conversion.

Anything precious and valuable must be tried (Proverbs 17:3). It was a law in Israel that everything that could abide the fire must go through the fire (Numbers 31:23). Whenever a sacrifice is offered to God, there is fire. You and I are to present ourselves to God as constant living sacrifices (Romans 12:1); but no sacrifice can be offered to God unless it was burned with fire. We could never be conformed to Christ were our feet not burned in the furnace (Revelation 1:15). Our Lord's feet represent his humanity. His head represents his Deity. Deity could never suffer; but his feet, his human body and soul, suffered all the wrath of God in this world, when he died as our Substitute. Thank God, we will never suffer his wrath (Romans 8:1). Yet, our feet must also be burned in the furnace.

The furnace of affliction, like the refiner's fire, has many uses. When blessed of God to our souls' good, the furnace is a very helpful place. The refiner's fire is a purifying fire. God uses trouble to purge the dross of sin that he hates from the soul that he loves. The furnace makes hard steel easy to mold. The blacksmith beats his iron on his anvil in vain until he puts it in the fire; but the heated iron bends to the touch. The furnace is a place of great light. We see things more clearly in the furnace than anywhere else. The vileness of our own hearts, the vanity of the world, the beauty of life, the blessedness of grace, the goodness of God, and the preciousness of Christ are all things seen most clearly in the fire.

What mercy it is for God to put us into his furnace! It is his hand that brings us into the fire; and it is his hand that brings us through it. If God has chosen you, you must go through the fire. If Christ has redeemed you, you must go through the fire. If God the Holy Spirit has called you, you must go through the fire. You will go into the furnace; but you will go through the furnace; and you shall not be harmed, but only made better, by the furnace (Isaiah 43:1-7).

The Fire of Conviction

I do not doubt that the fire spoken of here is primarily the fire of Holy Spirit conviction by the Word of God, the very fire of hell itself in your soul. — *“Is not my word like as a fire? saith the LORD (Jeremiah 23:29). — “Fire, and hail; snow, and vapour; stormy wind fulfilling his word” (Psalm 148:8). — “Thus saith the Lord GOD; Behold, I will kindle a fire in thee” (Ezekiel 20:47).* The chosen sinner’s time in the fire may be very long and slow, or short and fierce, but each must go through the fire. The Lord knows exactly what we need and what we can bear. As Robert Hawker observed...

“It is not always the hottest fire which produces the most softening effects. Some metals indeed are so stubborn, and the dross is so deeply ingrained into them, that they seem to require a hotter fire than others. But after the law has done its work, and the dross and tin have been purged away, the Lord does not usually bring again so hot a furnace.”

When the fire of conviction has done its work and the sinner convinced of his sin looks to Christ, the Lord God declares, *“They shall call on my name, and I will hear them: I will say, It is my people: and they shall say, The LORD is my God.” — “And it shall be said in that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, and he will save us: this is the LORD; we have waited for him, we will be glad and*

rejoice in his salvation” (Isaiah 25:9). But none will ever call upon him in faith who are not brought by him through the fire.

“O beware of trust ill-grounded;
‘Tis but fancied faith at most,
To be cured, and not be wounded;
To be saved before you’re lost.”

The Fire of Chastisement

Yet, throughout our days upon this earth, our great, gracious, and good heavenly Father continues to bring us through the fire, refining us as silver is refined and trying (proving) us as gold is tried. Trials and temptations, sickness and sorrow, domestic trouble and bereavements, slander and persecution, war and adversity, deep and daily discoveries of the body of sin and death that is in us, the hidings of our Savior’s face and the needful denials of the sense of his presence are all fiery trials of faith, through which our heavenly Father brings his “*little ones*,” fires by which he refines his silver and proves his gold. His “*fire is in Zion, and his furnace in Jerusalem*” (Isaiah 31:9); and when he brings us through the fire, it is to bring us into a wealthy place (Psalm 66:12). By these things we are brought to call upon, that is worship our God, who declares, “*They shall call on my name, and I will hear them: I will say, It is my people: and they shall say, The LORD is my God.*”

By these trials and exercises there is a gradual weaning from the world, a humility, meekness, and brokenness of spirit worked in us before the Lord, a greater simplicity and godly sincerity, more willing obedience to the precepts of the gospel, and a greater desire to know the will of God and do it. O that these fruits of the Spirit might abound in us and all the saints and servants of God!

Remember, it is God our Savior who puts us in the fire. It is in his furnace that we are tried. He is always with us in the furnace. He will bring us through the furnace. And when he does, he will bring us, at last, into heavenly glory, which shall be a wealthier place because of the fire through which he has brought us. Yes, the very fire by which we are tried shall *“be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ: Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory: Receiving the end of your faith, even the salvation of your souls”* (2 Corinthians 4:17-18; 1 Peter 1:3-9).

“God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea
And rides upon the storm.

Deep in unfathomable mines
Of never-failing skill
He treasures up His bright designs,
And works His sovereign will.

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;
The clouds you so much dread
Are big with mercy and will break
With blessings on your head.

His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour;
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flower.

Blind unbelief is sure to err

And scan His works in vain;
God is His own interpreter.
And He will make it plain.”