

God Takes Possession of His People

† Through striking and scattering (vv.7,8)

† Through refining and testing (vv.8,9)

In the name of Jesus our Good Shepherd, the Guide and Companion of heart and life, dearly redeemed:

It didn't seem to impress my grandfather much when I told him I wanted to be a smoke jumper. After Future Foresters of America took a tour of the training facility in Redmond, Oregon, I finally had a clue why not. Smoke jumpers have to work their way up to jumping out of planes to fight raging wilderness fires. Redmond had a six-story building with no windows. First, you learned how to jump and roll from one story, then two, up to six. Not just you in your blue jeans and boots. Add your backpack with ax and chainsaw and whatever other gear you need. Need I say, smoke jumping is dangerous?

Need we wonder why the Christian life is worse? What you and I face every day as Christians makes smoke jumping look like the big slide in a water park. *“As it is written: ‘For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.’”* (Romans 8:36 NIV) Smoke jumper or paratroop sergeants may seem sadistic to new trainees, but how else can you prepare for combat against bullets or flames unless you suffer the grueling pain of Boot Camp? This is real life – and real death. And so it must be when **God Takes Possession of His People** – not by choice but by necessity...

† Through striking and scattering (vv.7,8)

Jesus' disciples didn't have a clue either. No matter how many times He pointed to the cross, even after He died and rose again, they still asked at His Ascension: *“Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”* (Acts 1:6 NIV) You might as well ask your commanding officer, “Do I really have to jump out of that plane? Couldn't we just sit here and sip our pina colodas?”

You remember how lead disciple Peter rebuked his Lord Jesus for even mentioning death on the cross. That's when Jesus turned and told Peter, *“Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.”* (Matthew 16:23 NIV) In predicting Peter's three denials before the rooster crow, Jesus quoted from Zechariah: *“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.’ But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee.”* (Matthew 26:31-32 NIV) Peter answered the way you and I would. “Never, Lord! Not me! I'll die with you before I'll ever deny you.”

Do you remember when you said that? Maybe it's been a few decades since your Confirmation. But every communicant member of Christ at New Life promised to be faithful to the Lord Jesus even in the face of death. And we've heard the Lord's command and promise in His letter to the pastor and people at Smyrna: *“Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.”* (Revelation 2:10 NIV) But what little servant girl or fellow student or coworker got you to laugh at the Lord's name or deny Him by your speech and conduct?

God knows our hearts. It cannot be any other way. When **God Takes Possession of His People** it can only come about **Through striking and scattering**. Five centuries before Christ God's people needed to hear this message of Law and Gospel too: *“Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, against the [Champion of my people]!” declares the LORD Almighty. “Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered, and I will turn my hand against the little ones.”* (Zechariah 13:7f TPA)

Bad priorities were striking close to home. Earlier the LORD complained through Zechariah: *“When I called, they did not listen; so when they called, I would not listen,” says the LORD Almighty. “I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations, where they were strangers. The land was left so*

desolate behind them that no one could come or go. This is how they made the pleasant land desolate.” (7:13f NIV) Centuries of neglecting their own souls and not teaching their children God’s Word, left the Israelites without the Promised Land, scattered by the Babylonian Captivity for Judah and the Assyrian Captivity for the ten northern tribes of Israel. Judah returned after seventy years, as the LORD promised through Jeremiah. But the ten northern tribes never repented or returned. Now with Judah back, they were busy, busy, busy building their own homes and neglecting the temple of the LORD in Jerusalem.

Can you count how many times this week you put someone or something else first before God? Were there maybe a few thousand times you and I can’t even remember? It’s not that we mean to dishonor God or set up idols of money or home, job or friends in our hearts in place of God. We stumble into sin as naturally as a car tumbles into the river when a bridge collapses. All your sincerity, all your love for family, all your pride in your wonderful car, won’t keep your head above water when your life collapses into sin. Scattering to the whirlwind is what we all deserve from God. But how can we pray, **“Who can understand his errors? Forgive my hidden faults?”** (Psalm 19:12 TPA) How can we be confident that **God Takes Possession of His People Through striking and scattering**?

✠ **Through refining and testing (vv.8,9)**

Jesus says He is the **“Shepherd”** struck down by God on the cross. We are the scattered sheep of whom Jesus promised: **“I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.”** (John 10:14-16 NIV) **“Little flock”** (Luke 12:32) of believers, you are the **“one third”** Remnant which the LORD preserves for Himself **Through refining and testing.**

But none of us would choose to be God’s people without a miracle to change our minds, without God’s kindness to lead us to repentance. (Romans 2:4) God says we can expect when He makes us His own: **“This third I will bring into the fire; I will refine them like silver and test them like gold.”** Even when you trust God, it hurts. And sometimes it takes a while for our feelings to catch up with our faith.

In the early years of my ministry I was getting depressed at hard hearts and disapproval I kept confronting in God’s people. Everyone seemed to know what the pastor was supposed to be doing except the pastor trained and called by God to do it. I wanted to improve, but God also told Timothy through Paul: **“Let no man despise your youth.”** (1 Timothy 4:12 TPA) Somehow, without realizing it, and totally against my sanctified will in Christ, my old Adam took my eyes off God’s glory. Summer reading in a book called *Motivation for Ministry: Soli Deo Gloria*¹ was what God used to pull me out. Author Nathan Pope makes a great case for the fact that “burn out” really comes from self-glorification. But focusing on God’s glory brings God’s peace and joy. God said through Zechariah: **“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.’”**

Through refining and testing my joy in the LORD has increased. I’m so busy thanking the LORD for His mercy on me someone else’s thanks are a surprise. Two Easter cards one year said: “May the joy of your service to Him grow stronger and deeper within your heart – for He is your great reward.”² When the LORD Himself is your reward, nothing else matters. “Since He is mine and I am His, What can I want beside?” (TLH 426:1) **“If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?”** (Romans 8:31f NIV) Smoke jumpers, no, just followers of Him who says, **“Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the LORD, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.”** (Isaiah 43:1-3 NIV) Amen.

¹ Nathan R. Pope. *Motivation for Ministry: Soli Deo Gloria: perspectives for every pastor.* NPH, 1993. (800-662-6022)

² Rebecca Barlow Jordan, Dayspring Cards, www.dayspring.com .

For the study behind this sermon or for copies email m.cordes@comast.net .
You can also call: 651-484-1169. Hear the sermon at www.wels.us/newlife .

New Life Evangelical Lutheran Church
180 County Rd F - Shoreview, MN 55126