

The Dark Side of Love

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The little Book of Zephaniah will never take the place of the Gospel of John as number one in Bible popularity. The contents of this book have never been familiar, and I doubt that it has been read very much. I dare say that few have ever heard a sermon on Zephaniah.

Such neglect is not due to mediocrity or the inferiority of this little book. If its theme were known, I think it would be very much appreciated, because it has the same theme as the Gospel of John.

John is called the apostle of love, and as we study this book we will find that Zephaniah is the prophet of love. That may be difficult for you to believe, but let me give you a verse to demonstrate my point. You are acquainted with John 3:16, but you may not be acquainted with Zephaniah 3:17: “The LORD, thy God, in the midst of thee is mighty; he will save, he will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love, he will joy over thee with singing.” This is lovely, is it not? However, the prophecy of Zephaniah is a little different from the Gospel of John, for this verse is just a small island which is sheltered in the midst of a storm-tossed sea.

Most of this book seems rather harsh and cruel; it seems as if it is fury poured out. Chapter 3 opens in this vein: “Woe to her that is filthy and polluted, to the oppressing city!” Zephaniah’s prophecy is one of judgment involving more than the land of Israel. It is a worldwide devastation that is predicted here. The Book of Revelation confirms this and places the time of this judgment as the Great Tribulation period.

During that period, this earth will absolutely be denuded by the judgments that will come upon it. This will occur right before God brings in the millennial kingdom and renews the earth.

*Since there is so much judgment in this little book, how can love be its theme? To find proof that love is its theme is like looking for the proverbial needle in a haystack, but I will illustrate my point by telling you a mystery story. This may seem to be a very peculiar way to begin a study of Zephaniah, but it is going to help us understand this little book. The title of my story is **The Dark Side of Love**.*

There is a theme about which every believer should have a clear understanding if he is to walk in full assurance. It is the *dark side of love*—God’s love. And in order to make this clear, perhaps I should brief you on a terrifying scene.

It was late at night in a suburban area of one of our great cities in America. A child lay restless in her bed. A man with a very severe and stern look stealthily entered her bedroom and softly approached her bed. The moment the little girl saw him a terrified look came over her face, and she began to scream. Her mother rushed into the room and went over to her. And the trembling child threw her arms about her.

The man withdrew to the telephone, called someone who was evidently an accomplice, and in a very soft voice made some sort of arrangement. Hastily the man re-entered the room, tore the child from the mother’s arms, and rushed out to a waiting car. The child was sobbing, and he attempted to stifle her cries. He drove madly down street after street until he finally pulled up before a large, sinister and foreboding-looking building. All was quiet, the building was partially dark, but there was one room upstairs ablaze with light.

The child was hurriedly taken inside, up to the lighted room, and put into the hands of the man with whom the conversation had been held over the telephone. In turn, the child was handed over to another accomplice—this time a woman—and these two took her into an inner room. The man who had brought her was left outside in the hallway. Inside the room the man plunged a gleaming, sharp knife into the vitals of that little child, and she lay as if she were dead.

Your reaction at this point may be, “I certainly hope they will catch the criminal who abducted the little girl and is responsible for such an awful crime.”

However, I have not described to you the depraved and degraded action of a debased mind. I have not taken a chapter out of the life of the man in cell 2455, death row. I have not related to you the sordid and sadistic crime of a psychopathic criminal. On the contrary, I have described to you a tender act of love. In fact, I can think of no more sincere demonstration of love.

You see, that little girl had awakened in the night with severe abdominal pain. She had been subject to such attacks. It was her father who had rushed into the room. He had talked to the specialist about it, and when he saw the suffering of the little girl, he went to the telephone, called the family physician, and arranged to meet him at the hospital. He had rushed his little girl down to the hospital and had handed her over to the family physician. The doctor had taken her to the operating room and performed emergency surgery. Through it all, every move and every act of that father was of tender love, anxious care, and wise decision. I have described to you the dark side of love—but *love*, nevertheless.

The father loved the child just as much on that dark night when he took her to the hospital and delivered her to the surgeon’s knife as he did the next week when he brought her flowers and candy. It was just as much a demonstration of deep affection when he delivered her into the hands of the surgeon as it was the next week when he brought her home and delivered her into the arms of her mother. My friend, love places the eternal security and permanent welfare of the object of love above any transitory or temporary comfort or present pleasure down here upon this earth. Love seeks the best interests of the beloved.

Sickening Rather Than Stimulating

In our nation we have come through a period when the love of God has been exaggerated out of all proportion to the other attributes of our God. And it has been presented in such a way that the love of God is a weakness rather than a strength. It has been presented on the sunny side of the street with nothing of the other side ever mentioned. There is a “love” of God presented that sounds to me like the doting of grandparents rather than the vital and vigorous concern of a parent for the best interests of the child.

The liberal preacher has chanted like a parrot. He has used shopworn clichés. He has taken tired adjectives, and he has said, “God is love, God is love, God is love,” until he has made it saccharine sweet, and he has not told about the dark side of the love of God. He has watered love down, making it sickening rather than stimulating, causing it to slop over on every side like a sentimental feeling rather than an abiding concern for the object of love.

He Deals With Us Severely

However, I want you to notice that there is the dark side of the love of God. The Great Physician will put His child on the operating table. He will use the surgeon’s knife when He sees a tumor of transgression or a deadly virus sapping our spiritual lives or when He sees the cancerous growth of sin. He does not hesitate to deal with us severely. We must learn this fact early: He loves us just as much when He is subjecting us to surgery as when He sends us candy and flowers and brings us into the sunshine.

And sometimes the Great Physician will operate without giving us so much as a sedative. But you can always be sure of one thing: When He does this, He will pour in the balm of Gilead.

When He sees that it is best for you and for me to go down through the valley of suffering, that it will be for our eternal welfare, He will not hesitate to let us go down through that dark valley. Someone has expressed it in these lines:

Is there no other way, O God,
Except through sorrow, pain and loss,
To stamp Christ's likeness on my soul,
No other way except the cross?
And then a voice stills all my soul,
As stilled the waves of Galilee.
Can'st thou not bear the furnace,
If midst the flames I walk with thee?
I bore the cross, I know its weight;
I drank the cup I hold for thee.
Can'st thou not follow where I lead?
I'll give thee strength, lean hard on Me!

My friend, He loves us most when He is operating on us, "for whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth ..." (Hebrews 12:6).

Under another figure the Lord Jesus presented it yonder in the Upper Room to those who were His own. He said in John 15:1, 2:

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away; and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth [prunes] it, that it may bring forth more fruit.

We must remember that the Father reaches into your life and mine and prunes out that which is not fruitbearing—and it hurts! But, as some Puritan divine said years ago, "The husbandman is never so close to the branch as when he is trimming it." The Father is never closer to you, my friend, than when He is reaching in and taking out of your heart and life those things that offend.

It was Spurgeon who noticed a weather vane that a farmer had on his barn. It was an unusual weather vane, for on it the farmer had the words, GOD IS LOVE. Mr. Spurgeon asked him, "Do you mean by this that God's love is as changeable as the wind?" The farmer shook his head. "No," he said, "I do not mean that God's love changes like that. I mean that whichever way the wind blows, *God is love.*"

Today it may be the soft wind from the south that He brings to blow across your life, for He loves you. And tomorrow He may let the cold blasts from the north blow over your life—and if He does, He still loves you.

It has been expressed in these familiar lines written by Annie Johnson Flint in a way I never could express it:

God hath not promised skies always blue,
Flower-strewn pathways all our lives through;
God hath not promised sun without rain,
Joy without sorrow, peace without pain.
God hath not promised we shall not know

Toil and temptation, trouble and woe;
He hath not told us we shall not bear
Many a burden, many a care.
God hath not promised smooth roads and wide,
Swift, easy travel, needing no guide;
Never a mountain, rocky and steep,
Never a river, turbid and deep.
But God hath promised strength for the day,
Rest for the laborer, light for the way,
Grace for the trials, help from above,
Unfailing sympathy, undying love.

Beloved, if you are a child of God and are in a place of suffering, be assured and know that God loves you, regardless of how it may appear.

God's Love in Zephaniah

Now the little prophecy of Zephaniah sets forth the dark side of the love of God. I have a notion that very few people have ever heard a sermon on Zephaniah, and since it presents the dark side of God's love, I can well understand how it would be unpopular.

It opens with rumblings of judgment—the judgment of God that is coming upon this earth. Three verses in the first chapter are often the reason that many folk put the book down even before they get through the three short chapters. Here are verses 2, 15, and 16:

I will utterly consume all things from off the land, saith the LORD That day is a day of wrath, a day of trouble and distress, a day of waste and desolation, a day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness, a day of the trumpet and alarm against the fortified cities, and against the high towers.

You see, this little book opens with a Florida hurricane, a Texas tornado, and a California earthquake.

You might get the impression, upon reading this little book, that God hates His people. You would think that He is vindictive in His judgment, that He is cruel, brutal and unfeeling as He moves forward against mankind. Perhaps the theological liberal, who a few years ago made the statement that the God of the Old Testament is a big bully, had read only the first chapter of Zephaniah. I wish he had read all of it. He would have found that the God of the Old Testament is not a big bully, but that we are shown the dark side of His love.

God is Jealous

And over in the third chapter of Zephaniah, verse 8, we read this:

Therefore, wait upon me, saith the LORD, until the day that I rise up to the prey ...

The Great Physician is getting ready to operate.

... for my determination is to gather the nations, that I may assemble the kingdoms, to pour upon them mine indignation, even all my fierce anger; for all the earth shall be devoured with the fire of my jealousy.

I know that the theologian does everything he can to break down the expression “the jealousy of God” and tries to say that it really does not mean jealousy. My beloved, it does mean *jealousy!*

Sometimes you hear a wife say this, “You know, my husband is not jealous.” I have news for her. He does not love her if he is not jealous—or else he is just sure that no one else would be interested in her. It is one of the two reasons, you may be sure of that.

God’s Word says that He is jealous, and I cannot conceive of love that would not have that quality in it. It is not the jealousy of an Othello that is being spurred on by an Iago! This is jealousy of One who loves us and wants nothing to come into our lives that is going to hurt or harm us. He will do anything in the world to protect us.

In Zephaniah 3:2 we read:

She obeyed not the voice; she received not correction; she trusted not in the LORD; she drew not near to her God.

This is the diagnosis of the Great Physician. He is saying that the nation whom He loved needed to be put on the operating table.

Even in judgment, beloved, God is love!

God Will Rest in His Love

Now notice the final section of this little book, verse 17:

The LORD, thy God, in the midst of thee is mighty; he will save, he will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love, he will joy over thee with singing.

This verse is a talisman; it reaches on down into the very end of the age in which we are living. However, we are not concerned just now with the prophetic messages of Zephaniah; we want the message that is for you and me today. It is this: God wants to rejoice over you. He wants to rejoice over me. He wants to rest in His love for you and for me. This proposes a question to be faced: Can God rejoice over you and me this day; can He rest in His love for you and for me?

In Isaiah 53:11 we read:

He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied; by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities.

This refers to Christ’s sacrifice for the sin of the world. God is satisfied with what Christ did for the sins of this world, and if you trust in Him, you are complete in Him.

But wait just a minute! Is He satisfied with your life right now? Let me illustrate this in a very practical way.

On Mother’s Day I did something that I have not done in years: I sat and listened to someone else preach. It was a wonderful sermon, and while listening I had an opportunity to do something that I do not have opportunity to do when the pressure of preaching is upon me; I sat there and

looked at the folk in a very comfortable sort of way. I saw a mother wearing a lovely corsage sent to her by her son in the East. He is a prominent businessman, high up in government circles, but he is not a Christian. She is praying for him. She has asked others to pray for him. She said to me one Sunday morning after the message, with tears streaming down her cheeks, "Oh, Dr. McGee, I pray that God will save my boy. I pray that He will save him even if He has to put him on a sick bed; even if He has to kill him—I pray that He will save him." If the FBI heard her plotting like that, would they arrest her? No, sir! She loves her boy. As I looked out last Sunday morning and saw her sitting there, the tears slipping down her cheeks, I knew this: She is not rejoicing over him with joy; she is not resting in her love. She loves him with all her heart, and if giving her life would save that boy, she would give it immediately. Although she loves him, she cannot rest in her love.

Let's go back to our question: Is God satisfied with your life right now? I do not believe God can rest in His love for you and for me until we have been brought into His likeness.

God is Training His Children

And God knows how this can best be accomplished. Notice Hebrews 12:5, 6:

And ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto sons, My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him; for whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth.

God's treatment of you today is based on the relationship that He has with you. If you are His child, He is your heavenly Father. He wants to come to the place where He can rest in His love.

There are parents today who have by work and sacrifice put away a little money in order to send their boy away to school. After the boy is in school for awhile, he writes back, "Dad, it's hard here—the assignments are too heavy and the dormitory is too strict. I'm homesick, and I want to come home!" The father writes back a stern letter, "You stay on, study hard, and apply yourself." When that boy gets the letter from his dad, he says, "I don't think my dad loves me anymore. My dad *couldn't* love me or he wouldn't want me to go through this torture."

In a similar way God is training us.

The word *chastening* in Hebrews 12:5, 6 really carries no thought of punishment at all. Rather it means *to child train*. God is training you and me, not for an earthly career, but He is preparing us for eternity. And it is His principle always to deal with His children like this.

An interesting report has come from the Palomar Observatory. I read everything that is released from Palomar, describing what they are looking at up there—I wish they would let me look, but they will not. They say that out yonder in the Milky Way in the constellation Aquarius they have discovered a doughnut-shaped constellation that is remarkable. It is unusual because in the center is a dim star. Although that dim star cannot be seen very well down here, it does not mean that it is not a hot star. Astronomers say that the temperature is 270,000 degrees Fahrenheit on that star and that it is giving off light at such a cycle that our eyes can't see the light—it is ultraviolet, it is dark light. However, the light that is being given off is "triggering" light to all of the stars round about it. God uses the dark light to bring out the bright. I do not understand that in astronomy—it is beyond my thinking—but, my friend, I see God's principle in operation there. He disciplines us in order that He might bring us out into the light.

While in college I roomed with a boy who had a great deal to say about his father who was a banker in a small Mississippi town. He was a dictator, and he ruled with an iron hand the bank, the community, every farm on which he held a mortgage, and his own household. The boy told me that when he was growing up he thought his dad was hard on him. So he used to say, after his dad had given him a sound whipping, “When I get big enough, I am going to run away from home. I’m not going to stay here under him, he’s cruel and mean.” The day came when he did run away from home and joined the navy. It was several years before he returned home. When he did, he said to his dad, “Dad, I want to thank you for the way you trained me. I thank you for the way you disciplined me. I thought you were mean at the time, but I thank God for it now because it has made me a better man.”

My beloved, note what God says in Hebrews 12:9:

Furthermore, we have had fathers of our flesh who corrected us, and we gave them reverence. Shall we not much rather be in subjection unto the Father of spirits, and live?

I hear preachers talk about the golden streets of heaven. I’ll be honest with you, I don’t think the golden streets of heaven are going to be the most impressive thing there. I hear people talk about the gates of pearl and, friend, although the gates of pearl will be beautiful, I do not think they will be the thrilling thing. I hear people say that God is going to wipe away all tears—that is wonderful, but that won’t be the most wonderful thing of all.

Thanks for Trouble

Rather, I think you and I are going to look back on the brief life that we lived down here and our light affliction which was but for a moment. Then we will go to God and thank Him for every burden, for every trial that He gave us down here. We are going to thank Him even for sickness—not for healing, but for sickness. And we will thank Him for every problem, every disappointment, every faithless friend, every heartache, every false accusation that ever has been made against us. I think we will go to Him and we will say, “O God, I thank Thee for putting me on the operating table and cutting out that which was hindering me.” You and I are being trained and disciplined in order that we might have a place up yonder in Glory.

Perhaps one of the finest summaries of this essential teaching is found in these beautiful lines, written by an author whose name is unknown to me. I assume it comes out of the experience of a person who had spent some time in the crucible of suffering. The title is “In the Crucible.”

Out from the mine and the darkness,
Out from the damp and the mold,
Out from the fiery furnace,
Cometh each grain of gold,
Crushed into atoms and leveled
Down to the humblest dust,
With never a heart to pity,
With never a hand to trust.
Molten and hammered and beaten,

Seemeth it ne'er to be done.
Oh! for such fiery trial,
What hath the poor gold done?
Oh! 'twere a mercy to leave it
Down in the damp and the mold;
If this is the glory of living,
Then better be dross than gold.
Under the press and the roller,
Into the jaws of the mint,
Stamped with the emblem of freedom
With never a flaw or a dint;
Oh! what a joy, the refining
Out of the damp and the mold!
And stamped with the glorious image,
Oh, beautiful coin of gold!

Someday, when in the presence of our Savior, we will thank Him for every burden, every trial, and every heartache. We will thank Him for dealing with us as a wise Father deals with His children and for the dark side of His love.