

God's Passionate Love

What does God *think* about when He thinks about you? When God meditates on you in His heart, what does He *feel*? When God focuses His eyes on your soul, what does He see? When God opens His mouth to speak of you, what does He *say*?

Perhaps many of you would answer those questions like this: He thinks badly of me; He feels repelled by me. He sees all my ugliness, and He says, Yuk!

Nothing could be further from the truth! Notwithstanding what you have been told in the past or what you may feel in the present, when God thinks about you, feels for you, and sees you, He opens His mouth and sings with inexpressible joy!

God's love for you is so infinitely intense that He quite literally sings for joy. The depth of His affection is such that mere words prove paltry and inadequate. So profoundly intimate is God's devotion to you that He bursts forth in sacred song.

I'm talking about *you*. That's right, *you*, not just all the other people reading this article. I'm talking about each and every one of you who is convinced that no matter how many times I tell you God loves *you*, still you imagine He must have someone else in mind.

No, He has *you* in mind. You may say, "But, Sam, you don't know anything about me. You don't know how ugly I am.

"You've never been around when I've failed, asked forgiveness and then failed again 10 seconds later. You don't know how poor a wife I've been to my husband. You've never seen me blow it with my kids, losing my temper and breaking their spirits."

But I don't need to know *you*. I need to know only *God*! The issue here isn't who you are or what you've done. It's

strictly a matter of who God is—of His character and His determination to love you. Nothing else matters.

Take a look at Zephaniah 3:17. Observe how it has been translated:

- “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” (KJV).
- “The Lord your God is with you, He is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, He will quiet you with his love, He will rejoice over you with singing” (NIV).
- “The Lord your God is in your midst, a victorious warrior. He will exult over you with joy, He will be quiet in His love, He will rejoice over you with shouts of joy” (NAS).

After careful study of this verse I’ve come up with my own paraphrase. It’s not a word-for-word translation, but a free and expanded rendering of what I think the author had in mind. The original Hebrew text isn’t as clear-cut as we might hope, and others may differ with my interpretation. But I feel confident that my version will stand up to the scrutiny of study:

The Lord your God is with you all the time. He’s your strong and victorious hero. He is a powerful and mighty warrior who saves you. When He thinks of you He exults in festive pleasure and with great delight. At other times He becomes quiet as He reflects on His deep affection for you. He celebrates who you are with joyful singing.

Any way you read it the verse is stunning. Its force is unmistakable. If ever there were a Scripture worth committing to memory, this is it. It has rightly been called the John 3:16 of the Old Testament.

Hear what it says about God’s *presence*. He is always with you.

He is right where you are, no matter where that may be.

Moreover, the God who is present with you is also a God of unlimited *power*. He is a mighty warrior—your champion who fights on your behalf.

The Father's Passion

God's *presence* comforts me. His *power* reassures me. But God's *passion* overwhelms me. It may make you uncomfortable to hear me say that God is passionate for His people, but there's simply no way to avoid the force of this text. God exults, delights, rejoices and sings as expressions of His love.

Some theologians insist that God is impassible, that He does not have passions. I'm sensitive to their concerns. They want to emphasize that God is not weak or mutable or subject to fickle feelings that are provoked by others. I have to agree with them on that point. But it simply won't do to relegate texts such as the following to figures of speech or anthropopathisms.

“‘Is not Ephraim My dear son, the child in whom I delight? Though I often speak against him, I still remember him. Therefore My heart yearns for him; I have great compassion for him,’ declares the Lord” (Jer. 31:20, NIV).

No one fully understands the nature of God's nature. But I do believe God feels. I do believe God has emotions, passions, affections. In particular, He experiences delight and pleasure—dare I say *ecstasy*—over you and me!

In his book, *Jesus, Man of Joy*, Sherwood Wirt goes so far as to suggest that it was out of *joy* that God created the universe! Personally I think he's on to something. The biblical explanation for why God made it is “so that He might manifest His glory.”

But why did God wish to manifest His glory? The answer must be because it pleases Him to do so. That is another way of saying

it makes God happy.

Theologians rarely speak of joy as a divine attribute. They probably think it is beneath God's dignity (or theirs). But Wirt contends that "God's nature expresses itself most characteristically and distinctively through joy."

Therefore it was "for His own pleasure and joy" that "in the beginning God created the heavens and earth." God was delighted with the work of His hands and thus pronounced it, "Good!" What He made pleased Him.

If the thought of God's experiencing "pleasure" is a jolt to your religious sensitivities, consider what Jesus said in the parable of the talents: "Come and share your master's [God's] happiness" (Matt. 25:21,23). God is a happy God.

The glory of heaven is wrapped up in our participation in the very joy that floods the heart of the Father. Isn't this why Jesus came? His desire is for the joy of His own life to become the joy of ours (John 15:11).

One can only wonder at the depths of divine delight in the soul of the Son of God. Jesus intends for this very joy to fill up and overflow the hearts of His people (John 17:13). We are to experience not simply joy *in* God or even the joy that God *gives* but better still the very joy that God Himself enjoys. God's joy becomes our joy, and in that God takes joy!

All this is just another way of saying that *God is ecstatically happy in His love for His little ones*. If you still balk at such talk, return with me to my paraphrase of Zephaniah 3:17 and look closely at the three statements in the latter half of the verse.

First of all, God "exults over you in festive pleasure and with great delight." What makes this remarkable is that the same language used in verse 14 to describe our rejoicing over God is here used to portray God's rejoicing over us.

We are exhorted to sing. God too rejoices with singing! We are to experience joy. God too delights over us with joy. Back and forth, as it were, God and His people take turns enjoying one another!

All of us know what it's like to get excited about God. Isaiah declared, "I delight greatly in the Lord; my soul rejoices in my God" (Is. 61:10). But did you know that God gets just as excited over you? He Himself says, "'I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people'" (Is. 65:19).

Better still, God exults over you in "festive pleasure" or with "great delight." How else can I say it? When God thinks about you, His child, His heart explodes in glad celebration. There is divine glee and jubilation beyond words when the almighty God ponders His own.

If you think I'm just making this up, look at how the terms in Zephaniah 3:17 are used elsewhere; ask yourself if "glad celebration" and "glee" and "jubilation" are too strong.

"When the men were returning home after David had killed the Philistine, the women came out from all the towns of Israel to meet King Saul with singing and dancing, with joyful songs and with tambourines and lutes" (1 Sam. 18:6).

"And all the people went up after him, playing flutes and rejoicing greatly, so that the ground shook with the sound" (1 Kings 1:40).

Merriment, elation, hoopla, unbridled glee, raucous mirth. That's how we feel about the grace of God and the God of grace. But that's also how He feels about us.

If you are bothered by what seems to be irreverent rowdiness on the part of God, look closely at what comes next in the text. "He becomes quiet as He reflects on His deep affection for you."

Here we see a love that is so deeply felt, so profound, so perfect, that words are inadequate, indeed, unnecessary. To put it bluntly, God is speechless! The all-wise God, the “never-at-a-loss-for-words” God, the God with perfect insight into every situation, the God who always speaks correctly and with divine precision, is here moved to utter silence! Such is the impact of His love for you.

After the clamorous, yet spiritual, celebration, it is as if God says, “I love you so much that I can’t find words to express it. You so perfectly satisfy My every desire and fulfill My every wish that I long simply to embrace you in My arms and quietly enjoy your presence.” God is so entirely absorbed in you that He feels no need to say anything!

There may be times when you think God has “hung up” on you. He’s nowhere to be found. Perhaps you suspect He has become bored with who you are and what you’re doing and moved on to more intriguing people in His kingdom. No! His silence is not a reflection of *disinterest* but *enjoyment*. God is sincerely captivated in His affection for you, and words would only spoil the experience.

From Silence to Song

But the silence is eventually broken. Not with cries of disgust. Not with a burst of anger or stinging criticism born of frustration with your failures. But with singing. That’s right. God begins to sing, over *you*.

If it were possible to eavesdrop on solar systems millions of light years away, would we hear anything? Is there sound in space?

I believe there is one voice that would indeed be heard. Even now, in the farthest reaches of infinity, among the trillions and trillions of stars yet unseen by human eyes, echoes forth the passionate voice of the Father, singing about His love for you and me.

Loudly and wholeheartedly, God shouts with joy over His children. He fills the black holes with the light of His love and sings the stars to sleep with lullabies about *you*.

Let that thought comfort you and bring you both joy and peace.

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