

Zephaniah's Song of Joy

You may be familiar with this story. It is about a father and son who were very close and they became even closer after the mother died of cancer. At the time the young boy reached his late teens he was called up to fight in the war. That broke his father's heart. One day his father got the news he had been dreading since his son left. His son had been killed in combat. A few months later there was a knock at the door and it was a young man, whose arm had been blown off in battle. Beneath his good arm was a photo wrapped in brown paper. The young man said, 'Sir, you don't know me and I don't know you but I wanted you to know that your son saved my life. He took the bullet so I wouldn't have to. And he meant so much to me that I painted this picture of him and I want you to have it.' The soldier handed the picture to the proud, emotional father. He unwrapped it to find a very poorly painted picture of his son.

The father was, actually a wealthy man who collected fine art. He took his Picasso painting down and replaced it with the picture of his son. Years went by and the father grew old and feverish and he died. His house was to be auctioned, and collectors came from all over the world to his estate to bid for the Picasso and other famous paintings. The auctioneer started the auction with the painting of the young son. There were loud groans throughout the crowd as they shouted, "Come on! Let's get to the good stuff, we don't want that worthless thing." The auctioneer ignored the jeering and shouting and said, "Who will make the first bid? A pound, anybody?" From the back came the old gardener and asked if he could buy it. He had known the boy as he was growing up. He bought the picture for £1, and started to walk down the aisle with the picture tucked under his arms, very pleased and contented. Suddenly the auctioneer slammed down the mallet and said, "Sorry everyone. The auction is over. In the Will it reads, 'Whoever has the son, gets it all.'"

Whoever has the Son, gets it all. Isn't that what our Christian faith is all about? Isn't that what the Bible is about? Isn't that what John is saying in our Gospel: 'I baptize you with water but someone is coming who is much greater than I am. I am not good enough even to untie his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.' And in order to 'get it all' (as in the story) John tells us that we must repent, turn away from evil ways and follow God's Son, Jesus. This is his message. He doesn't pull any punches. He gives it straight between the eyes. Act or reap the consequences.

In many ways John was reinforcing the Old Testament view of God, which is hard to accept. We do struggle with a God who is angry about sin, and a Bible that spends a lot of time warning us about the judgment that's going to come when we are so bad. Deep down we would like to hear that, actually, our sin is not that serious, and God isn't that concerned with it. John says that this is not the case and God wants us to find every practical way possible to repent. No half measures.

In our first reading we heard from Zephaniah! Zephaniah was a prophet during the reign of Josiah, around 640–609 B.C. Israel had already been exiled, and Judah was about to follow. Josiah became king at 8 years old and just 18 years later, they found the Scriptures in the Temple, and Josiah became leader of a renewed nation. The first two-thirds of the short book of Zephaniah makes for depressing reading. He was prophesying of future judgment on Israel, by Babylon, that would occur around 587 B.C. The people will be carried away captive as punishment for abandoning the Lord and worshipping other gods. In the future, Israel would plead for God's deliverance.

One of the most direct descriptions of the anger of a judgmental God anywhere in the Bible appears in the opening verses of Zephaniah. The Lord said that 'I will destroy everything on earth, all human beings and animals, birds and fish. I will bring about the downfall of the wicked. I will destroy all mankind and no survivors will be left. I, the Lord has spoken.' Follow that! Two thirds of the book of Zephaniah this Minor Prophet follows a similar theme. But at the very end of the book we have Zephaniah's Song of Joy. O Palmer Robertson writes that this is 'one of the most moving descriptions of the love of God for his people found anywhere in Scripture. God and his people attain heights in the ecstasy of love that are hard to comprehend. The preacher C.H. Spurgeon said, "This passage is like a great sea, while I am as a little child making pools in the sand which skirts its boundless flood." I read, somewhere, that we often talk, pray, think and act as if God were frowning down on us like a mechanic on a broken down car. This passage makes us think.

This is not a subdued, quiet, dignified joy. Apparently the Hebrew words used in verse 17 are used elsewhere in the Bible to describe this great jubilation. This is not, "God watching us from a distance" as Bette Midler's song 'From a Distance' told us, twenty years ago. What Dawkins chooses to ignore is that the Bible teaches us, over and again that God is not impersonal, and distant; he wants an intimate relationship with us. In fact, for those of us who believe in him and want to work with him, He is a God who loves us so greatly and is filled with such joy for us, that He sings over us! A difficult concept for us to grapple with but Zephaniah says that when Israel humbles herself before her God, God rejoices with singing. And when we meet him we hear that song loud and clear! Zephaniah uses every available phrase to tell us to rejoice which is a bit odd when he has spent most of the book referring to God's judgment. Our God is complex. He is judge but as Psalm 108 (vv 8-9) tells us so clearly: 'The Lord is merciful, loving, slow to become angry and full of constant love. He does not keep on rebuking; he is not angry for ever.' Zephaniah wrote his song of joy over 600 years before Jesus' birth but he is pointing to what Jesus will accomplish for us. In his complexity God did not compromise his love and grace in order to deal with our sin and our guilt. TOGETHER our readings tell us this. Paul writes, in Romans (8:1): 'there is therefore now no condemnation for those who live in union with Christ Jesus' Jesus took our sins to the Cross. Sing and rejoice!

Our God is deeply affected, by our attitudes and actions. He doesn't watch from a distance but enters into our world. Our God became human at the first Christmas and therefore has deeply invested in the life of our world. When the gardener bought the poorly painted picture of the man's son, he got it all. 'Whoever has the son, has it all!' shouted the auctioneer. "Have you ever thought about what God thinks about you? Do you think he is happy with you? Or is he a bit disappointed? Does he put up with you? The same applies to me. And what can we do about it? We can receive what God gives us, accept and rejoice in it. Whoever has the Son has it all! And to have the Son, is to come into a relationship with him, believe and follow him, letting this new reality change everything about us. Zephaniah says that God rejoices and delights in saving you and me. He sings over us. And as for us! What more can we possibly do than buy into God's Son, become, amazingly and inexplicably, one of God's loved ones and join in the celebration.

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