

I want you to turn to Zephaniah chapter 3. We're going to look at verse 17 this evening. Zephaniah 3.17.

If you've ever tried to wrestle along with John 3.16, you realize that it is one of those passages that is beyond human comprehension.

And as we come to Zephaniah 3.17, it's sometimes called the John 3.16 of the Old Testament, where we're coming to is a deep, passage. To quote the end of Romans chapter 11, when we come to a passage like this, we say, who has known the mind of the Lord or who has been his counselor, who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid for from him, through him and to him are all things to him be the glory forever and ever. Amen. We simply have to bow and worship when we come to a passage like this. Last week we saw in the verses preceding verse 17, we saw the saved singing. We saw the saved singing, and this probably is not a surprise to you that the saved sing. Why wouldn't the saved sing? You've been saved.

How else would you want to respond other than to worship the one who has saved you? However, it can be hard to believe that the God who saved you actually loves you. It can be the temptation of the human heart, even the saved human heart, to think that God saved me, but he doesn't actually really love me. He saved me, but he doesn't really want anything to do with me. He saved me, but at best, he simply puts up with me. It's almost as if we believe on a daily basis that he saved us, but he doesn't really care about us. It isn't hard to conceive that God would hate me, but it is actually hard to believe that he would love me, that he would really want to spend eternity with me.

But here is the truth. God is not like you. God is not like you. It might be hard for you to believe that God loves you because it's hard for you to love yourself. Or it might be hard for you to believe that God loves you because others around you do not love you. Or it may be hard to believe that God loves you because, frankly, you know you don't deserve his love. But I have good news for you. God isn't like you.

So with that in mind, let us pray and read Zephaniah 3, 17. Almighty God, we come before a passage that is high and exalted, but we pray that in your mercy you would open up our eyes to understand it rightly, to love what you teach us, to accept it, to store it up in our hearts, to practice it in our lives. By the power of your spirit, in the name of Jesus we pray, amen.

Zephaniah 3.17, this is the word of God, give your attention to it. The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save. He will rejoice over you with gladness. He will quiet you by his love. He will exult over you with loud singing. Thus ends the reading of God's holy word. May he bless the proclamation of it to our lives.

Well, beloved, our theology about God matters. What you think about God shapes how you functionally relate to him. What you think about God is going to shape how you relate to him. But here is the problem that all of us face. We all tend to think that God is just like us, only bigger.

We think that God is like us in that he has some strength, but he's unlike us in that he's stronger than us. We think that he's like us in that he has some wisdom, but he's unlike us in that he's wiser than us. We think that he's like us

in that he has some knowledge, but he's unlike us in that he has more knowledge than we have. But what the scriptures teach is actually that God isn't just quantitatively different than us, God is qualitatively different than us. The theologians call this God's being *sui generis*, which simply means that he is in a category all of his own. God is not like us. When we do our theology from the perspective that God must be like me, we end up with all sorts of problems. Why? because we assume that how I act must be how God acts.

So for example, if I blow up and lose my temper with my children, then that must be how God acts towards me. I blow up and lose my temper towards my children, therefore God must blow up and lose his temper with me. If I can't forgive myself for some wicked thing that I've done, then God can't forgive me either. Why? Because God is just like me. If other people hate me and think lowly of me, then God must hate me and think lowly of me. Why? Because God is just like one of us. What's the problem with this way of thinking? Well, here's the problem.

It doesn't let God be God. God tells us who he is and it is our job to listen. We don't get to tell God who he is. In our passage tonight, God says four things about how he relates to his people. And all four of these things are rather shocking. All four of the things that God says about how he relates to his elect children are shocking. They're hard to believe.

But I wanna ask you this question tonight before we even get into the text. Will you let God be God tonight? Will you simply let him tell you who he is and how he relates to his people? Will you receive it? Well, this night, we see that God is not like you, and we see this in four ways.

God saves you. God rejoices over you. God loves you. God sings over you. So first tonight, God saves you. We read these words, O Lord, your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save. You see at the opening of this verse that the Lord is speaking here, the Lord Yahweh, the covenant-making, covenant-keeping God, and we read that He is in our midst.

Now, before we go any further, we need to ask ourselves, is that a good thing? You see, perhaps our immediate assumption is it's a positive thing that the Lord is in our midst. But if we can remember much of what we have seen in the book of Zephaniah thus far, God being in your midst is not a good thing unless the God in your midst has provided an atoning sacrifice for your sins. God being in your midst is a terrifying thing unless the God in your midst has determined to have mercy upon you, that he has provided propitiation for your sins. But here in 317, you do see that he is in your midst, and he's in your midst as a mighty warrior to save you.

God is not like you. Would you save yourself if you were God? Would you be merciful to such a sinner as you are if you were God? I imagine you would not be so gracious as God is if you, in fact, were God. But I have good news for you. You're not God, and God is not like you. What does the text declare to you here? What does it declare to you that God does for his people? He saves them. God does not save those who are worthy of being saved. He saves those whom he saves. So you are saved here this evening.

Will you be content with the fact that God, for reasons unknown to you that you can't comprehend, has determined to save you in Jesus Christ? Will you be willing to receive the fullness and the freeness of this salvation for you? Will

you be willing to admit that you have done nothing to earn this salvation, that you do not deserve it, that there's no part of you that has merited it, and yet he has saved you?

Oh the depths of the wisdom and knowledge of God. How unsearchable are his judgments, how inscrutable his ways. Who has known the mind of the Lord? Who has been his counselor? Who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid? For from him, through him, and to him are all things to God be the glory forever and ever, amen.

When Paul utters that, it is after three chapters of meditating on the electing, saving grace of God towards sinners like him. Will you receive this truth that God saves you, not because of anything in you, but simply because he saves you? But then he moves on in this verse to our second point. Not only does God save you, we read next, that God rejoices over you. God will rejoice over you with gladness, the text reads. God saving you is one thing, but God rejoicing over you, you simply have to ask, is this possible? How in the world can the creator of the universe rejoice over me? And he rejoices over you in Jesus Christ.

You remember the words of Hebrews chapter 12, verse two, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy, joy that was set before him, endured the cross. Matthew Henry says, there were two things that supported the human soul of Jesus Christ as he went through that unbearable suffering. There were two things that supported his human soul. And it was that he delighted to satisfy his father and that he delighted or took joy in reconciling sinners to God. This brought him delight. This brought him joy.

You know, somewhere in the institutes, I remember reading John Calvin describe the way that God speaks to his people as being like the way an adult speaks to little children, he lisps to us in a way that we can understand, he gets down on our level so to speak and speaks baby to us so that we can understand what he is saying. And that is sort of what you see going on here in this verse. God states clearly, it's really obvious isn't it, what the text says, he rejoices over you. It's not hard to understand what he's saying, but it's hard to believe it. It's hard to believe that what he's saying is in fact just what he is saying. But we must remember that God isn't like you. And we must remember, let's let God be God. Yet what are the elect prone to do? I'm speaking to the elect. What are the elect prone to do? We want to say, God couldn't rejoice over me. Look how wretched I am. Look how sinful I am.

But I say again, let God be God. Let him speak for himself. Be like Samuel who says, speak, O Lord, for your servant is listening. Let me ask you this. Is God rejoicing over you daily, even as he is calling you to repentance? The answer is yes. He is calling you to repentance daily and he is simultaneously rejoicing over you. Now, how can this be true? How can these two things be true at the same time? That he sees my sin and yet he is still rejoicing over his elect. In part, I have to confess, I don't know. And yet at the same time, I do think I can say that I know in part. And here is what I do think I can say I know in part.

It's only in the Lord Jesus Christ. He delights over you. Even in your sin, not your sinning, but in your sin. Because you are in his son, the Lord Jesus Christ. You object here this evening. You say he cannot rejoice over me. Even in Jesus, you say, he cannot rejoice over me. He is all knowing. He knows who I really am. He's not allowed to do that. That's impossible. Well, first of all, remember that God is in the business of doing the impossible. That's exactly what he says he does.

But let me give you, let's go on a journey together briefly this evening. It's a journey that I took a few weeks ago, not even with this passage in mind. Turn with me to Isaiah 42, verse one. I want to convince you this evening that he does rejoice over you. And I want to convince you because I want to show you from the scriptures that it's simply the truth. He rejoices over the elect. Isaiah 42 verse 1, behold, my servant whom I uphold, my chosen in whom my soul delights, rejoices. I have put my spirit upon him. He will bring forth justice to the nations. About whom is that text speaking? The Lord Jesus Christ, right? The promised Messiah to come.

He delights in him. Turn to Isaiah 53 verse 10. So he delights in his son. That's easy enough to understand. None of us find that too complex in the sense of how could he not? His son's perfect. He's God. They're one substance. Verse 10 of Isaiah 53, yet it was the will, that's the exact same word delight from Isaiah 42 verse one, it's the exact same word, yet it was the delight of the Lord to crush him. So he delights in his son, 42 one, he delights to crush him, 53 10. Our assurance of pardon this evening.

He delights in steadfast love, the exact same word. He delights in his son. He delights to crush his son. How can he delight to crush his son? Because he delights in his steadfast love for his people. I'm not telling you that I understand that in my finiteness, but I am telling you that if you track the logic of scripture, it's clearly undeniable that he delights. He rejoices in his elect. He rejoiced in his son. He rejoiced to crush his son, and he rejoiced to crush his son because he rejoices to show steadfast love to his people. Third, God loves you. That's our third thing. We see that he rejoices over us in the second point. Now we see that God loves you in this third point. We read this, he will quiet you by his love.

Now at this point in verse 17, he has just been stacking up one astonishing statement about God's affection for his people after another. And why does he keep doing this? Why does he keep stacking one comment about God's affection for the elect after another in this verse? Well, I think he is doing it in part because he knows how prone his people are to forget this truth. And so he is trying to go over this in thoroughness so that his people in their forgetfulness might not forget it. They might believe it. Commenting on this verse, Calvin says that God repeats this language, this sort of language about his love for his people, his rejoicing over his people, his saving his people. He repeats this sort of language to quote, convince us of God's ineffable love towards us so that we may rest in it.

And I would encourage you, if you have any time this week, go read John Calvin on Zephaniah 3.17. It's amazing. But the idea then, John Calvin is suggesting, at least in part of this repetition of language, is simply to convince us that it is true, that he really does care for his people, that he really does love them and rejoice over them. But I think there is another reason as well why God is stacking up this sort of language, one phrase after another. It's not just to convince us that he loves us, it's simply because he actually does love us. And the reason I say that is for this reason. Let me try to capture it like this.

Every husband knows you need to tell your wife every day you love her. Now, You do that, hopefully, for at least these two reasons. One is because you're trying to convince her it's true, kind of like John Calvin is saying God is doing here. You're trying to remind her, hey, I do, in fact, still love you, because your wife might be prone to forget that, and maybe you've given her a reason. But also, hopefully, more fundamentally, it's actually just because you actually love your wife, and you simply just want to tell her.

I hope every man in the room has simply wanted just to tell his wife he loved her, not for any other reason other than he wanted to let her know that he loved her. And God here is expressing the affection of his heart in that sort of way towards his elect. Yes, it's to make sure you know it's true, but it's also simply because this is his heart towards his elect.

Now the phrase, he will quiet you by his love, is admittedly hard to translate. But most commentators agree with the translation of the NASB at this point, which translates it as follows. He will be quiet in his love. He will be quiet in his love. And that is more accurate to the just a literal bare bones reading of the original. He will be quiet in his love. What does that mean? Well, it means that he'll be content or he will delight in his love.

You can love someone by singing, which we'll see in a moment, but you can also love someone in silence, can't you? Every one of us has known the sense of the love of silence. When you've either loved somebody this way or been loved this way, where you've either just gone and sat next to somebody, didn't say a word, but it was good enough. You didn't need to say a word. It was merely being in that person's presence. You were satisfied in a sense. You were content in a sense because you were simply in the presence of the one whom you love.

God is quiet. He is silent in his love. He is finding great joy and contentment merely in being in the presence of his elect. John Calvin puts it this way. John Calvin, remember, someone we wouldn't normally think of speaking in this manner, God wished nothing more than sweetly and quietly to cherish his church.

Now, why is this so hard for you to believe? Because you are prone and we are prone to make God in our own image. We think I could not love myself, therefore God could not love me. But here is the profound truth. You are not God. And God is not like you. God's love is not like our love. God's love doesn't well up from something outside of himself. It wells up from inside of himself. His love issues, not from anything outside of himself, but from his own being. Now, this is not how our love works.

When we love someone, there's always something that draws us to that person to love them. There was something in your spouse. There was something in your friends. There was something in your coworkers that drew you to that person and caused you by something outside of yourself to have an affection for that person.

But this is not so with God. God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. And as Luther famously said, the love of God does not find but creates that which is lovely to it. So I ask you today a very practical question.

Can you sing Jesus loves me? Can you sing it from the heart? I did not ask can you sing I love me or my spouse loves me or my friends love me because at the end of the day that is not what matters most. What matters is, can you sing Jesus loves me? And can you sing it in humility because the Bible tells me so? Let us never think that we are too mature to sing Jesus loves me. I had the privilege, as some of the men in the room probably know, of picking the hymns for our weekend, and I made the last hymn we sang on the first night, Jesus loves me. Because if a bunch of men can't stand around and sing, Jesus loves me, we have big problems. We need to be able to sing that.

Who loves you the most in the whole world? It's not your parents. It's not your brothers and sisters. It's not your spouse. It's a three-way tie. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. They love you, the triune God loves you, if you are his elect, more than anyone else. So I ask you, will you let God be God and receive the love that he has for you this evening? And then fourthly, God sings over you, verse one, 17, he will exalt over you with loud singing.

This is perhaps the hardest to believe of all. Most commentators agree that there seems to be an ascending profundity to this verse. So it begins with this acknowledgement that he saves and we can sort of kind of take that in to some extent. And then he's rejoicing over us and we think, I don't know about that. And then he's loving us and even being quieted in his love for us, he's sort of content just to be loving us. We're thinking, this is really starting to stretch my willingness to believe that God could be this way. And then we're told he's singing over us. And that just goes beyond anything we can possibly imagine. And it is amazing. And it should be amazing. Because it is.

And this is the only time, probably, in scripture, there's one other text that's debated where Yahweh is said to sing. You know, last week I made the point in verse 14 through 16 that the saved sing. And I made the point that when we sing, we usually do that to try to express something that is sort of beyond what we think our normal language is able to capture. And so we sing about it, whether it's sorrow or sadness. or gladness and happiness. We sing about those things because it's trying to express something that we don't believe our ordinary language can capture. And that's what we do towards God in verse 14. But what we see happening here is that God is doing that towards his elect in verse 17. He is singing over his elect.

If this were not written in Holy Scripture, we dare not imagine that it could be true. Yet, since it is written in Holy Scripture, we dare not deny that it is true, because it's simply what the text says. Again, we naturally ask how, how, and so we should, and so we must. And while I cannot fully explain how, two things do come to mind.

First, because the Lord wills it. I mean, that's part of the reason, he just wills it. But second, it's true because of union with Christ. Because as a Christian, you are united to Christ such that, as John 17 tells us, he has a love for you that is even like the love he has for his very own son. So while we must acknowledge some level of incomprehensibility at this point, We can say that it's because he wills it, and it's because I am united to Christ.

I am a new creation in Christ Jesus. He does not deal with me according to my sins, nor repay me according to my iniquities, but he cast them as far as the east is from the west. God is not like you. God will love those whom he loves, and that is his prerogative, not mine.

It's my duty to be like a little child who's willing to receive what he tells me. Will you do that tonight? Will you be content just to take him at his word? As the hymn puts it, "'Tis so sweet to trust in Jesus, just to take him at his word, just to rest upon his promise, just to know, thus saith the Lord."

To all the elect this evening, God is not like you. He saves you. He rejoices over you. He loves you and he sings over you. Do you know how I know this? Because thus saith the Lord. This is not my opinion. This is the word of God. If you're in Christ this evening, he loves you and he rejoices over you. He sings over you with gladness. He has saved you. and he wants to spend eternity with you. I am as human as the rest of us in the room.

If the word of God did not declare it, by God's grace, I would not say it. But I ask you, go through that text and show me where God has not said that which I have spoken. Let us pray. Almighty God, we confess that there is a depth to the text before us that we certainly cannot plunge, but we pray that we would believe. For the text is clear, but the heart is struggling.

But God, you can make us believe. Help us, O Lord, to believe, even though we do believe. Help us to embrace by faith more fully the heights and the depths and the widths and the breadths of the love of God for us in Christ Jesus. For this, O Lord, would be a great delight to our souls.

How much more joyful would we be if by your grace you caused us to believe Zephaniah 3.17. Oh God, we do believe, but help indeed against our unbelief. For anyone who may not know this love, oh Lord, if there be anyone here who isn't just struggling, but is sincerely completely lost, we pray that as this love found us and is continuing to help us to believe it to be true, this loving mercy and kindness would seek them and cause them to know this love which we for no reason other than your sovereign will have come to know ourselves. It's in Jesus's name we pray, amen.