

FROM THE MINISTRY OF



THRU the BIBLE

THE **DARK** SIDE
of
God's Love

DR. J. VERNON MCGEE

INTRODUCTION

Unless you've been on the Bible Bus, *Thru the Bible's* 5-year journey through the whole Word of God, you may not ever study the little book of Zephaniah. Not many sermons ever travel through the back side of the Old Testament. Do you even know where to find Zephaniah in the Bible? (Go to the end of the Old Testament and then back four books.) In this short study of this small but significant book, learn from Dr. McGee about another dimension of God's love.

THE DARK SIDE OF GOD'S LOVE

Surprisingly, the tiny book of Zephaniah shares the same theme as one of the best-known books of the Bible, the Gospel of John. John is called the *apostle* of love, but when we meet Zephaniah, we'll discover he is the *prophet* of love.

John 3:16 is an amazing verse about God's love, but have you ever read Zephaniah 3:17?

The LORD your God in your midst, the mighty One, will save; He will rejoice over you with gladness, He will quiet you with His love, He will rejoice over you with singing.

What a great verse!

But Zephaniah's prophecy is a little different from the Gospel of John. This verse is just a small island sheltered on a storm-tossed sea. Most of the book seems rather harsh, even cruel—like fury poured out. For example, chapter 3 opens with “woe to her who is rebellious and polluted, to the oppressing city!” Where's the love there?

Zephaniah's prophecy predicts worldwide devastation. The book of Revelation confirms and places the time of this judgment as the Great Tribulation Period. The earth will be absolutely devastated by judgments in a time right before God ushers in the millennial kingdom and renews the earth.

So, how can love be the theme in a book with so much judgment? Let me prove it by telling you a mystery. This might seem like a strange way to begin a study of Zephaniah, but it'll help us understand this little book.

Every believer must clearly understand one thing: The *dark side* of God's love. Not what you were expecting? To make this clear, picture the scene:

Late at night in a typical suburban home, a child lays restless in her bed. From the hall, her bedroom door opens just an inch so the light falls on the little girl's face. She begins to cry as a man with an intense look quietly approaches her bed. Her mother rushes into the room, putting herself between the man and the child, and the trembling girl throws her arms about her.

The man, now whispering into his phone, alerts another person waiting for his call. Now in a hurry, the man re-enters the room, tears the child from her mother's arms, and rushes out with her to a waiting car. As the child sobs, he drives madly down street after street until he finally pulls up before a large, foreboding building. Partially dark, only one room upstairs is ablaze with light.

He covers the child with a blanket and hurriedly takes her inside. Up to the lighted room, he rushes the crying child to an inner room, handing her off to a second man. The child, now eerily limp and quiet, is taken on a stretcher to where a group wait inside a room. A final look through the door spies a gleaming, sharp knife, slicing into the abdomen of that little child while she lay as if she were dead.

What a nightmare! You may be thinking, *What a terrible crime! These monsters must be stopped!*

But take a fresh look with another perspective. This isn't a criminal act—this is a tender, sincere act of love.

You see, the little girl woke in the night with severe abdominal pain. Her father rushed into the room, and when he saw his precious daughter suffering, he called the family doctor who told him to get his little girl to the hospital as quickly as possible. Then the dad handed her over to the team of doctors who performed emergency surgery. Through it all, every move and every act of that father was of tender love, anxious care, and a wise decision.

This is 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 day when he brought flowers and balloons to her recovery room. It was deep affection when he delivered her into the hands of the surgeon just as it was the next week when he brought her home and delivered her back into her mother's arms.

My friend, love places the eternal security and permanent welfare of the loved one above any temporary comfort or present pleasure down here upon this earth. Love seeks the best interests of the beloved.

Today the love of God is exaggerated out of all proportion to His other attributes. God's love is also presented as a weakness rather than a strength. The way modern thinking portrays the love of God is like the dotting of grandparents rather than the vital and vigorous concern of a parent for the best interests of the child.

The liberal preacher repeats, "God is love, God is love, God is love," until it is saccharine sweet to the point of being sickening rather than stimulating. In ignoring the dark side of love, it's a sloppy sentimental feeling rather than an abiding concern for the object of love.



Love
SEEKS THE BEST
INTERESTS OF THE
beloved.

- DR. J. VERNON MCGEE

The dark side of God's love means 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, a deadly virus sapping our spiritual lives, or the cancerous growth of sin. He does not hesitate to deal with us severely. We must learn this fact early: God loves us just as much when He is subjecting us to surgery as when He overwhelms us with gifts. He loves us in stormy weather or when the sun shines on our faces.

Sometimes the Great Physician will even 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 (see Jeremiah 8:22). When God sees it is best for you to go down through the valley of suffering, that it will be for your eternal welfare, He will not hesitate to let you into that valley.

***Is there no other way, Oh 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!"***

—Anonymous

My friend, God loves us most when He is operating on us, "for whom the LORD loves He chastens ..." (Hebrews 12:6). The Lord Jesus presents it this way when He says to His disciples in the Upper Room:

I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit.

—John 15:1, 2

The Father reaches into our lives and prunes out that which is not fruit-bearing—and it *hurts!* But as some Puritan writer 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 Him.

Charles Spurgeon once noticed a weather vane on a barn. It was unusual, because on it the farmer had the words GOD IS LOVE. 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 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.

A favorite poem of mine expresses this in a way I never could:

*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.*

-Annie Johnson Flint

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

THE FULL PICTURE OF GOD'S LOVE

Few of us ever heard a sermon on Zephaniah. Since it presents the dark side of God's love, I can well understand how it would be unpopular.

It opens with rumblings of God's coming judgment on this earth. Three verses in the first chapter are often the reason many put the book down and never pick it up again:

"I will utterly consume everything from the face of the land," says the LORD That day is a day of wrath, a day of trouble and distress, a day of devastation 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. –Zephaniah 1:2, 15, 16

See what I mean?

You might get the impression that God hates His people. That He is vindictive in His judgment. Cruel. Brutal and unfeeling as He moves forward against mankind. But keep reading and you'll find the God of the Old Testament is not a big bully, but that Zephaniah simply shows us the dark side of God's love.

GOD IS JEALOUS

In Zephaniah 3 we see the Great Physician getting ready to operate:

“Therefore wait for Me,” says the LORD, “until the day I rise up for plunder; My determination is to gather the nations to My assembly of kingdoms, to pour on them My indignation, all My fierce anger; all the earth shall be devoured with the fire of My jealousy.” –Zephaniah 3:8

Many Bible teachers try to break down the expression “the jealousy of God” and make it say something other than jealousy. My beloved, it means *jealousy! God is jealous for you.*

Sometimes you hear a wife say, “Oh, my husband isn't jealous.” I have news for her. When a woman and a man fall in love, he ought to say, “I want you for myself. You belong to me.” And she should be able to say, “He's mine; you keep your hands off of him.” When you love someone you want the world to know you belong to each other.

There is an idea that jealousy is a terrible, awful thing today. But jealousy in the Word of God is not looked upon as something wrong. Exodus 20:5 says, “You shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God” God says Himself that He's jealous for us. We belong to Him alone.

Then Exodus 34:14 tells us one of God's names is *Jealous*. God is jealous. He said to His people, “I don't want you to serve these other gods because I'm jealous. I love you. I have made a way for you to come to Me, provided My Son who is going to die for you.”

A man with a beard and a young child are sitting on a wooden pier. The man is wearing a white t-shirt and dark pants, and the child is wearing a blue dress. They are both looking down at each other. The background shows a body of water with ducks and a sunset sky.

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.

- DR. J. VERNON MCGEE

God proved His love to us because He wants you, and He wants you to Himself. I can't think of anything more wonderful than that. 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 has not obeyed His voice, she has not received correction; she has not trusted in the LORD, she has not drawn near to her God.

This is the diagnosis of the Great Physician. He is saying the nation whom He loves needs to be put on the operating table. Even in judgment, beloved, God is love!

GOD RESTS IN HIS LOVE

The LORD your God in your midst, the Mighty One, will save; He will rejoice over you with gladness, He will quiet you with [rest in] His love, He will rejoice over you with singing. –Zephaniah 3:17

This verse is so broad in its description of God's love that it reaches down into the very end of the age in which we are living. However, it's not Zephaniah's prophetic message we focus on now; it is this: God wants to rejoice over you. He wants to *rest* in His love for you.

This poses the question: *Can* God rejoice over and rest in His love for you and me today?

Isaiah 53:11 refers to Jesus Christ's sacrifice for the sin of the world:

He shall see of the labor of His soul, and be satisfied. By His knowledge My righteous Servant shall justify many, for He shall bear their iniquities.

God is satisfied with what Jesus did for the sins of this world, and if you trust in Him, you are complete in Him. But wait a minute! Is He satisfied with your life right now?

Here's a story to put this in a practical way.

On a recent Mother's Day I did something I haven't done in years: I sat down and let someone else preach. As I listened to the sermon, I got to look at the listening congregation in a comfortable sort of way.

One dear woman in our church body got my attention. I noticed she was wearing a lovely corsage sent to her by her son. He is a prominent businessman, high up in government circles, but he is not a Christian. She is praying for him, and she has asked others to pray for him. She said to me once, with tears streaming down her cheeks, "Oh, Dr. McGee, I pray God will save my boy. Even if He has to put him on a sick bed, even if He has to kill him—I pray He will save him." If the FBI heard her plotting like that, would they arrest her? No! She loves her boy. As I 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? He cannot rest in His love for you and for me until we have been brought into the likeness of His Son. ...And He knows best how to get this done.

GOD TRAINS HIS CHILDREN

And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as to sons, "My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; for whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives." –Hebrews 12:5, 6

God treats you today based on the relationship 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.

Imagine parents who have by work and sacrifice put away money in order to send their son away to school. After the boy is in school for a while, he writes home: “Dad, it’s hard here—the assignments are too heavy and the dorm 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 could say, “I don’t think my dad loves me anymore. He *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 really carries no thought of punishment at all. Rather it means *to child train*. God is training you not for an earthly career, but He is preparing you for eternity. It is His principle always to deal with His children like this.

An interesting report came from the Palomar Observatory. It said out yonder in the Milky Way in the constellation Aquarius they discovered a remarkable doughnut-shaped constellation. 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 it is not a hot star. Astronomers say the temperature is 270,000 degrees Fahrenheit on that star and it gives off light at such a cycle our eyes can’t see the light—it is ultraviolet, a dark light. However, the light that is being given off is “triggering” light to all of the stars surrounding 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 to bring us out into the light.

THANKS IN TROUBLE

While in college I roomed with a boy who had a great deal to say about how hard his father was on him growing up. He told me he used to say, “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, “Dad, I want to thank you for the way you trained 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 human fathers who corrected us, and we paid them respect. Shall we not much more readily be in subjection to the Father of spirits and live?

You and I are being trained and disciplined so we might have a place up yonder in Glory.

GOD TREATS YOU TODAY BASED

ON THE *relationship* HE HAS WITH YOU.

IF YOU ARE HIS *child.*

He is your heavenly Father.

- DR. J. VERNON MCGEE

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 God is going to wipe away all tears—that is wonderful, but that won't be the most wonderful thing of all.

Rather, I think you and I are going to look back on the brief life we lived down here and “our light affliction, which [was] but for a moment” (2 Corinthians 4:17). Then we will go to God and thank Him for every burden, every trial He gave us down here. We are going to thank Him even for sickness—not for healing, but for sickness. 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 say, “O God, I thank You for putting me on the operating table and cutting out that which was hindering me.”

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.

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.

A photograph of two men, one Black and one white, smiling and talking to each other outdoors. They are gesturing with their hands as if in conversation. The background is slightly blurred, showing other people in a park-like setting.

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A close-up photograph of a person's hands holding a smartphone. The phone screen displays a list of booklets from the TTB.org website. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with a wooden table.

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