

SPECIAL STUDY ELEVEN

THE LOVE OF GOD AND HIS DIVINE PURPOSE OF LOVE AS MANIFESTED IN THE PROPHETS

by Gerald Sappington

"For the Lord is a God of justice . . ." (Isaiah 30:18c).

"And in anger and wrath I will execute vengeance . . ." (Micah 5:15).

"For the Lord is enraged against all the nations, and furious against all their host, he has doomed them, has given them over for slaughter." (Isaiah 34:2).

"Thus says the Lord of hosts: Behold, evil is going forth from nation to nation, and a great tempest is stirring from the farthest parts of the earth!

"And those slain by the Lord on that day shall extend from one end of the earth to the other. They shall not be lamented, or gathered, or buried; they shall be dung on the surface of the ground.

"Wail, you shepherds, and cry, and roll in ashes, you lords of the flock, for the days of your slaughter and dispersion have come, and you shall fall like choice rams. No refuge will remain for the shepherds, nor escape for the lords of the flock. Hark, the cry of the shepherds, and the wail of the lords of the flock! For the Lord is despoiling their pasture, and the peaceful folds are devastated, because of the fierce anger of the Lord. Like a lion he has left his covert, for their land has become a waste." (Jeremiah 25:32-37).

"For behold, the Lord will come in fire, and his chariots like the stormwind, to render his anger in fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire. For by fire will the Lord execute judgment, and by his sword, upon all flesh; and those slain by the Lord shall be many." (Isaiah 66:15, 16).

"Now the end is upon you, and I will let loose my anger upon you, and will judge you according to your ways; and I will punish you for all your abominations. And my eye will not spare you, nor will I have pity; but I will punish you for your ways, while your abominations are in your midst. Then you will know that I am the Lord." (Ezekiel 7:3, 4).

These and other passages in the Old Testament present a concept of God that to many seems irreconcilable with the picture of the loving

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Father that is woven through the pages of the New Testament. Some speak of the existence of two Gods, one of the Old Testament, and one of the New Testament. Others speak of the evolution of the God-Concept. Even many church members think God somehow underwent a personality change during the intervening years between the Old and New Testaments. However, upon closer examination of the scriptures the truly poignant love of God is seen in no greater depth, and with no greater clarity, than in the Old Testament, especially in the prophets.

In the bloom and elegance of the poetic language of these forth-tellers to Judah and Israel, we have the Love of God revealed through six euphuistic pictures.

THE SHEPHERD

Isaiah speaks of God's bestowing the tender love and care of the shepherd. "He will feed his flock like a shepherd, he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young." (Isaiah 40:11). This picture of God is not unlike that given in Luke 10 of the Good Shepherd. Indeed, these two passages seem to indicate no evolution of the concept of God, but, rather the uniformity of expression of God's love for His people.

SAVIOR AND REDEEMER

Throughout the Prophets we find God as a loving Savior and Redeemer of His people.

"For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for your life. Fear not, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; I will say to the north, Give up, and to the south, Do not withhold; bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth, every one who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made." (Isaiah 45:3-7).

"For he said, Surely they are my people, sons who will not deal falsely; and he became their Savior. In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved thee; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old." (Isaiah 63:8, 9).

Every prophet gives forth with a call to repentance that God might be their Savior and Redeemer; and, that He might ultimately use them to bring forth the "root of Jesse" to be the Savior of the world. God's love as the righteous and faithful Redeemer of His wicked and faithless people is unfathomable.

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HUSBANDMAN

God is a husbandman says the prophet Isaiah. "Let me sing for my beloved a love song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He digged it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes." (Isaiah 5:1, 2). God showed his love to Israel and found his love spurned. The extent of God's love in this allegory can only be imagined in His cry of despair in verse four. "What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it? When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?" And yet God's love was so great He was still striving to draw them back and renew the cords of love.

A MOTHER

In most cultures the love of a mother is exalted as being the highest and purest emotion. And surely as William Makepeace Thackeray wrote, "Mother is the name for God in the lips and hearts of little children." And as the divinely inspired prophet spoke to the wayward childlike citizens of the nation of Israel, he appeals to this figure of God as a loving mother in yet another effort to call them to repentance. "Can a woman forget her suckling child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you." (Isaiah 49:15). "As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you . . ." (Isaiah 66:13)

A HUSBAND

Another beautiful figure of God's love is the love of a husband for his wife. "For your Maker is your husband, the Lord of hosts is his name and the Holy One of Israel is your redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called. For the Lord has called you like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit, like a wife of youth when she is cast off, says your God. For a brief moment I forsook you but with great compassion I will gather you. In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you, says the Lord, your Redeemer . . . For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you . . ." (Isaiah 54:5-8, 10a).

The prophet Hosea gives further reality to this figurative description of God. The story of Hosea is one of tragedy, the tragedy of a man with an unsearchable love for an unfaithful wife. His beloved Gomer

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had gone after other lovers, caring not for her former husband. However, as time passes her paramours grow weary of her and cast her into slavery. But, because of his deep love for her, Hosea "Bought her . . . for fifteen pieces of silver, and a homer and a half of barley," looking forward to a renewal of the love and happiness that they had once experienced.

Israel was truly the betrothed of God, but committed adultery with the idols of Baal. Yet, God too was willing to take His wandering beloved back to his bosom. Hosea pictures God as being so deeply in love that he would not be turned aside in His search for His people. He would not let go until love had had its way. "Therefore, behold, I will allure her and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her. And there I will give her her vineyards, and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. And there she shall answer as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt." (2:14, 15). "I will heal their faithlessness; I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them." (14:14). Just as Hosea went to the market place to buy back his wayward wife and take her again into his home, so would the great Lover redeem and take back His beloved Israel. The prophet sees a vision of God waiting, yearning, pursuing, wooing, winning, redeeming, and restoring His wandering bride.

God's love for Israel is typical of the same love that Christ has for his bride, the church. Surely, this Old Testament concept of God's love is not one degree inferior to the concept of His love as presented in the New Testament.

THE LOVING FATHER

One final figure, the most common, and perhaps the most meaningful of all is the figure of God as the loving Father. Again, it is suggested by the uninitiated that the idea of a God as a loving Father is inherent to the New Testament and completely foreign to the Old Testament. However, the one who is not satisfied with a quick superficial examination of the scriptures quickly sees the Fatherhood of God was as much a part of the Old Testament concept of God as it is a part of the New Testament concept. "For thou art our Father, though Abraham does not know us and Israel does not acknowledge us; thou, O Lord, art our Father, our Redeemer from of old is thy name." (Isaiah 63:16). "Yet, O Lord, thou art our Father; we are the clay, and thou art our potter; we are all the work of thy hand." (Isaiah 64:8). "With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back, I will make them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which

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they shall not stumble; for I am a father to Israel and Ephraim is my firstborn." (Jeremiah 31:9). "I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him." (Malachi 3:7b).

For the most touching description of the love of God as a Father we again refer to the writings of Hosea. "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals and burning incense to idols. Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms, but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of compassion, with the bands of love, and I became to them as one who eases the yoke on their jaws, and I bent down to them and fed them . . . How can I give you up, O Ephraim! How can I hand you over, O Israel! How can I make you like Admah! How can I treat you like Zeboim! My heart recoils within me, my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger, I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come to destroy." (Hosea 11:1-4, 8, 9).

Here we get a glimpse into the tender heart of God, the loving Father, who has His heart broken into bits by ingratitude, immorality, ignorance, and rejection. We have pictured the affectionate care with which the Father redeemed his young unattractive slave boy from the land of Egypt. In spite of all the blessings bestowed by the Father, the boy rebelled and broke the Father's heart. Then comes the loving, despairing cry of the crushed father, "How can I give thee up?" Surely God's love for His son Israel, in spite of all his weaknesses and failings, dwarfs any love that an earthly father can have for his son. And it is out of this divine emotion that God brought forth discipline and punishment upon his wayward son, just as an earthly father punishes his erring child out of his deep love for that child.

CONCLUSION

God in the Old Testament, especially as revealed by the Prophets, was the God of Love. His love was so great that His constant purposes of proclamation of His message by the prophets was the redemption of mankind. This not only included Israel, but all living, for we often find God sending messengers to the pagan nations in the pre-Christian era. And in His love, coupled with discipline, He prepared a people and a world to receive perfect redemption. "For God so loved the Israelites, the Assyrians, the Philistines, and the Egyptians, as well as the Americans, the Russians, and the Africans, that in the fulness of time He sent forth His only Son, that whosoever believeth in Him might not perish but live in the eternal presence of this great God of Love!"