

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
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## **A Joyful God**

Zephaniah 3:14-20

The 1981 film *Chariots of Fire* tells the true story of two British runners competing in the 1924 Olympics. One of them, Eric Liddell, is a devout Christian. His sister Jennie wants him to leave competitive running and join the family on the mission field in China. The way Jennie sees it, Eric is putting running ahead of serving God, and she questions his commitment.

In one scene, Eric tries to help his sister see his point of view. Eric announces with a smile, "I've decided I'm going back to China. The missionary service has accepted." Jennie interrupts him, "Oh, Eric, I'm so pleased." Eric continues, "But I've got a lot of running to do first. Jennie, you've got to understand. I believe that God made me for a purpose, for China. He also made me fast, and when I run, I feel his pleasure. To give it up would be to hold him in contempt. You were right; it's not just fun. To win is to honor him."

Like Eric Liddell, we want to live lives that honor God, and do things that please God. But Liddell's description also stirs us to reflect more deeply on the conviction that God takes pleasure in, and experiences joy over, who we are and what we do. "He made me fast," says Liddell, "and when I run, I feel his pleasure." This is no detached and unfeeling deity, who relates to us only from a distance, and is unaffected by human attitudes and actions. On the contrary, this God is deeply engaged with us and moved by who we are and what we do in our relationship with him.

God's people Israel knew this. We see it reflected in today's Scripture passage from Zephaniah. The book of Zephaniah is fairly short, only three chapters long. And most of those chapters are filled with words of doom and judgment. The prophet pounds out a series of condemnations of God's people. They've worshiped false gods. Their rulers have acted like the leaders of other nations. Their life together is filled with violence, fraud, complacency, and even the faithless assumption that God is powerless. As the indictments pile up, it's no wonder that Zephaniah warns about a coming Day of the Lord, when God will fully implement his judgment and set things right.

This seems like a far cry from the joyful God who feels pleasure when Eric Liddell runs. But we need to remember that God can be both just and joyful. The two are not incompatible. In fact, both the judgment and the joy depend upon one another and need one another. That's why they both show up, and are at home with one another, in the book of Zephaniah. By the time we get to the end of the book, God responds to the pleas of his people and withdraws his judgment. He issues a pardon to his people. Restoration, rather than condemnation, becomes the last word. No wonder Zephaniah urges the people, "Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, "O Daughter of Jerusalem! The Lord has taken away your punishment, he has turned back your enemy" (vv. 14b-15a).

You would expect the people to be joyful when that kind of news arrives. But what's most interesting is that God is also busy rejoicing. Verse 17 summarizes God's own celebration:

"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." The words used in this verse are used elsewhere in the Bible to describe great jubilation. God delights! God rejoices! God sings! There's nothing subdued or quiet or dignified about this. Which makes me think, doesn't God know that it's Lent? Isn't Lent usually perceived as a season of spiritual seriousness, sobriety, and self-discipline? In fact, last Sunday I preached a whole sermon on the topic of self-control. So maybe God should dial back the volume on his joyfulness.

Or, maybe we should be more like God. Sometimes we followers of Jesus aren't the community of joy that we're called to be. We lose sight of the joy of the Lord, and treat our life together as a matter of being deadly serious, all the time. There's an episode of the television show "The Simpsons" where the daughter, Lisa, goes undercover in a convent to get back her little sister Maggie. The nuns in the day care are singing, "If you're happy and you know it, that's a sin."

Couple that with another story about a six-year-old girl named Angie and her four-year-old brother Joel who were sitting together in church. Joel was giggling, singing, and talking out loud. Finally, his big sister had had enough. "You're not supposed to talk out loud in church." "Why?" said Joel. "Who's going to stop me?" Angie pointed to the back of the church and said, "See those two men standing by the door? They're hushers."<sup>1</sup>

In today's text from Zephaniah, there are no hushers telling God to tone it down on his salvation celebration. That's because it's part of the nature of God, the character of God, the very heart of God, to be glad over our salvation. As pastor Jeremy Treat points out, we often think of God's attitude toward us in negative terms. He's either disappointed, angry, or indifferent to us. Or, at best, he's not mad at us, and treats us as not guilty. Treat says:

Many Christians carry this perception of God because we overemphasize what we are saved from and overlook what we are saved for. Imagine if someone asked me how I feel about my kids, and I said, "I don't hate them." That's a true statement, but it's not enough. I love my kids. I delight in them. But when we think of our relationship with the Lord, too often we only think of the things God doesn't think or feel: "He's not mad at me. He forgave my sin."<sup>2</sup>

But our relationship with God goes way beyond just having him forgive us and not be mad at us. As Treat puts it, "God does not tolerate his people; he delights in us."<sup>3</sup> God rejoices in having redeemed us and restored us. He celebrates having saved us through Christ. God experiences gladness about having us be his people. Rather than being miserly with his mercy, God is generous with his grace, and he sings over what his grace can accomplish.

On an island off the southeast coast of France, there's a famous abbey that contains an unusual sculpture, a crucifix. Dating back to possibly the 12th century, the crucifix is titled, "The Smiling Christ." Jesus is on the cross, his head leaning somewhat to the right, his eyes closed in death. But on his lips is a soft, serene smile. Perhaps the sculptor meant to capture a sense of peace following Jesus' last words, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46). Or perhaps the sculptor meant to convey not only the sorrow of Christ's death but also the joy of our redemption in him. What might be mistaken as only bad news of defeat is actually good news about triumph through Christ. And God does not hesitate to rejoice about the victory he has over sin and death, a victory that includes rescuing us and making us his people. Remember that the God we worship and serve is a God who is mighty to save, and eager to celebrate.

Earlier in our service, we had a Scripture reading from Luke 15, which includes the parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the lost coin, and the parable of the lost son. In each case, we the hearers are invited to join in the delight that comes from finding what was lost. "Rejoice with me" (vv. 6, 9). "We had to celebrate and be glad" (v. 32). These aren't just stories about how human beings are. They're first and foremost stories about how God is, and what God is like. According to pastor John Piper, "We must banish from our minds forever any thought that God admits us begrudgingly into his Kingdom, as though Christ found a loophole in the law, did some fancy plea-bargaining and squeaked us by the Judge. No way! God himself, the Judge, put Christ forward as our substitutionary sacrifice, and when we trust him God welcomes us with bells on. He puts a ring on our finger, kills the fatted calf, throws a party, shouts a shout that shakes the ends of creation and leads in the festal dance."<sup>4</sup>

If that's the kind of God we worship and serve, a God who views his covenant with us as a delight, not just a duty, then how should we live out the call to be his people? It only makes sense that our service to God should be a matter of delight, not just a duty. Drew Dyck writes about a television commercial in which a young man is struggling with whether to go through with an arranged marriage:

. . . In his home country arranged marriages were the norm. But after living in America, he was having second thoughts about adhering to this ancient custom, especially since he'd never met his wife-to-be.

Still, when she flew into the airport, he dutifully waited for her, flowers in hand, and a gloomy expression on his face. But when she stepped through the terminal, everything changed. She was beautiful! Suddenly his glum demeanor disappeared. The thought of marrying this woman was no longer a dreaded duty; it was a delight. What had changed? He'd seen her.

Often we serve God out of obligation. We drag ourselves to church, force ourselves to serve others—but our hearts aren't in it. We're like that guy at the airport, grudgingly holding flowers for God. We're trying to live holy lives because we know we should, but it's burdensome, joyless.

What can change this? Seeing God. When we get a vision of who God truly is, suddenly we're energized to do his mission. Once we gaze upon his grandeur and glory, obedience ceases to be arduous. Once we grasp his great love, serving is no longer a duty—it's a joy!<sup>5</sup>

God wants us to be joyful people because he is a joyful God. And the more we see of God's capacity to celebrate, and his desire to delight, the more we can participate in the joy of God. He doesn't come to us grudgingly. He isn't with us just as a matter of putting up with us. His goal isn't to endure us. His goal is to have us be holy as he is holy, and to reflect and embody his joyful presence in the world. According to today's Scripture, God deeply desires, more than we can realize or imagine, to have us be his people for his purposes in his creation. He's a God who rejoices over our repentance, and sings over our salvation.

<sup>1</sup> Gusty Chartrand, Lampman, Saskatchewan. Christian Reader, "Kids of the Kingdom."

<sup>2</sup> Jeremy Treat, "God Is Not Out to Get You." Christianity Today website. October 21, 2016. Accessed February 21, 2018 <<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2016/november/god-is-not-out-to-get-you.html>>.

<sup>3</sup> Treat, "God Is Not Out to Get You."

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in "Can You Hear the Singing?" SermonCentral.com. April 2009. Accessed December 2, 2012. <<http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/can-you-hear-the-singing-tim-hbc-sermon-on-gods-love-134705.asp>>.

<sup>5</sup> Drew Dyck, *Yawning at Tigers* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2014) 54.