

The Covenant Pulpit



Zephaniah 3:14-17

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Oprah Winfrey is the most powerful woman in American pop culture, and one of the most influential people in the world. Every day twelve million people tune into her television show. Her media empire is worth billions. If she endorses a book it becomes a runaway best seller. When she backs a political candidate it's worth millions of votes.

But most significantly, Oprah Winfrey is on the cutting edge of a tidal wave of new spirituality that is reshaping postmodern Christianity.

She was raised a Baptist, and regularly attended services well into her 20s. But one Sunday she heard a sermon that shook her evangelical belief system. This is what Oprah says about that fateful morning:

“The minister was preaching about how great and omniscient God was, and that God was a jealous God, and something struck me: God is great and God is jealous? Jealous of me? And something about that just didn't feel right.”

She started on a spiritual journey that eventually led to New Age guru Eckhart Tolle, author of *A New Earth*. Oprah adopted Tolle's fusion of humanism and eastern mysticism, and repackaged it in quasi-Christian language. Here are some basic tenets of her new spirituality:

- Who you are requires no belief
- Heaven is not a location, but a realm of consciousness
- My mind is part of God's. I am very holy
- My holiness is my salvation
- My salvation comes from me
- The man on the cross is a type of every man and woman
- The message of the cross is that we are free to be ourselves
- The greatest sin is to label anyone a sinner

How can you not love Oprah Winfrey? She's beautiful, brilliant, and generous. And her new spirituality is extremely appealing, especially for millions of postmoderns who say, “**I want to be free to be me!**” New spirituality is like the *Make-A-Bear* store where you go buy the parts and construct your own teddy bear. In the *New Spirituality* store you create your own reality. You can even assemble a God who isn't disturbing, demanding, or dangerous. This *Make-A-Bear* God allows you to “be free to me.”

Remember what launched Oprah's odyssey: she was disturbed by the concept of a jealous God. She was wrong when she said that God is jealous

of us. But she wouldn't be mistaken to say that he is jealous *for* us. In Exodus 20:5 he declares, "I the Lord your God am a jealous God." Though certain kinds of jealousy are unhealthy, there's a godly jealousy that has a passion for intimacy. Jealousy and love are intertwined. Jealousy hates unfaithfulness. It demands exclusive commitment. Jealousy is the stabbing pain a wife feels when she sees her husband's eyes wandering. It's the anger a husband feels when his wife is too tired for him. Jealousy is a mother who fights like a lioness to protect her young. It's a pastor who will not let his congregation drift into complacency. Jealousy is a friend who will not shrug her shoulders and "I'm okay, and you're okay" when we *aren't* okay.

St. Augustine said, "The God who made us for himself wants us for himself." God's zeal cannot be answered with a shrug. Psalm 42:7 says, "Deep calls to deep..." Passion calls for passion. I think that this jealous God is both exhilarating and dangerous. Oprah I'd like you to meet Zephaniah. Here's what the prophet says about our God:

At the heart of God is a blazing passion for us.

Zephaniah delivers his prophecy about 650 years before Christ. His age is stunningly like our own. Terrorist groups called the Scythians have turned the Middle East into chaos. In what is modern day Iraq the insurgent powers of Assyria and Babylon are at war for control of the Euphrates River Valley. Farther to the east (in what is modern day Iran) Persia is an awakening world superpower. They all want to see the ultimate destruction of Israel. Little has changed in the Middle East since 2600 hundred years ago.

God's people have abandoned God to worship idols of their own making. Their passion has been dissipated by the pursuit of prosperity and pleasure. Political leaders are telling lies, immorality is rampant, and the economy is unraveling. Zephaniah's world 2600 years ago reads like today's headlines.

For the most part, his prophecy is depressingly negative, full of doom and gloom: God will pour out horrific judgment on Israel which will be followed by his wrath against the empires that come against his people. Oprah wouldn't like this prophecy, but I find it exciting. God is a jealous God. He cares passionately about his people. He doesn't sit by passively while they turn into spiritual zombies. He pursues them ruthlessly until they return to their senses. This is an exhilarating love, but it's also dangerous. When the Assyrians, Babylonians, and Persians are done ravaging his people, and they return to him, God will turn on these evil empires with all the rage of a jealous husband. His wrath is intertwined with his love.

Hebrews 10:31 says, "It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of a Living God." But it is also a wonderful thing. At the end of his prophecy, Zephaniah shares a glorious word of hope for Israel. This God who demands everything from us also delivers everything to us. In Zephaniah 3:14-17 we see this from the joyful side of a jealous God:

1. God's passion for us should ignite a passion for him. He says in verse 14, "Sing, O Daughter of Zion; shout aloud, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O Daughter of Jerusalem!" This is a call to worship. Notice three things about this worship: 1) **God commands it.** It's not an option. This is what he wants. 2) **It is highly expressive.** Notice the action verbs. "Sing!" "Shout aloud!" "Be glad!" "Rejoice!" 3) **It is passionate.** "Be glad and rejoice *with all your heart...*" Hold nothing back. Worship with all your energy. This is not worship for high-bound Presbyterians.

Our God loves passionate worship. If you don't believe me, go to the book of Revelation. Watch what takes place in the throne room of God: elders falling down before him, angels dancing, multitudes singing like thunder, trumpets and stringed instruments, and a kaleidoscope of exotic creatures, bright colors, and unrestrained praise. Where do you think we get that exuberance that erupts at a football game, or explodes into rage, or bursts into song? We have been created in the image of a passionate God to express passion. Look at verse 17 and see that everything God calls us to do, he does too: "He will take delight in you...he will rejoice in you with singing." We burst forth with joy and erupt into singing because he does. .

2. The greatest passion we have ever experienced is the passion of Christ. We are rejoicing this morning because of God's goodness to us in our capital campaign. But nothing can ever compare to Christ's passion for us. When Zephaniah talks about the future joy of Israel he is not referring to their return from Babylonian captivity. This is something far bigger than the nation of Israel. Verse 14 says that this is about the "...Daughter of Jerusalem..." Zephaniah is looking some 700 years ahead to the New Testament Church. This is Covenant Presbyterian Church. We are the daughter who have been birthed by Israel and became the bride of Christ. Look at the phrases Zephaniah uses:

1) Our Judgment Removed

Verse 15 says, "The Lord has taken away your punishment..." Literally the Lord has *carried* away your punishment. This is the passionate love of a God jealous for his wayward bride that he takes on flesh in his pursuit of her. He

pursues her all the way to the Cross. He bears the cosmic burden of her sins. He the Lord jealous for his bride takes on the wrath of a God jealous for his justice. He carries away that punishment into the bottomless pit of hell and leaves it there. We are now liberated from our guilt. This is the joy that God's jealousy brings us.

2) Our Enemy Cast Down

Verse 15 goes on, "...He has turned back your enemy." Literally the original Hebrew says, "He has cast down your enemy." There is one enemy of our soul: the raging lion that goes about seeking whom he may devour; the thief who comes to kill and to steal. He deceived our first parents, and he has enslaved all their descendents. But God makes a sure promise to Satan in Genesis 3:16: A Savior will come and "...he will crush your head." At the Cross Christ delivered a knockout blow to Satan. Satan may still roar against us, but he is now a toothless lion, bound in chains

3) Emmanuel Forever

Verse 15 continues, "...The Lord, the King of Israel, is with you..." Christ is called *Emmanuel* which means "God with us." Christ spent 33 years among us. Before he ascended to heaven he said in Matthew 28:20, "Surely I am with you even to the very end of the age." When the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost, Jesus spiritually returned to live in the body of Christ. His presence and power is in each of us. I John 4:4 says, "Greater is he who is in you than he who is in the world." No wonder St. Paul can say in Romans 8:37, "We are more than conquerors through him who loved us." And Philippians 1:6 promises, "He who began a good work in you will carry it on to the day of completion." His passion pursued when we were sinners, redeemed us at the Cross, and stays with us until we are conformed to the image of Christ. We praise him because he is jealous for our triumph in him.

3. His passion for us never grows cold. We have seen it the past days in our capital campaign. In verse 17 we see the jealousy of a mother for her baby. I think I would be safe in saying that Covenant is God's baby. He birthed this church into existence by his Holy Spirit. Look at Zephaniah's picture of a mothers love in this verse.

1) He never leaves or forsakes us

Verse 17 begins with these words: "The Lord your God is with you..." A loving mother has an intense jealousy for her child. Nature teaches us that

there is no creature more watchful or ferocious than a mother when it comes to protecting her young. I remember that horrific accident in Detroit. An airliner crashed, killing everyone on board (or so they thought). As the inspectors sifted through the bodies they heard a baby's cry. Wrapped around the baby was the charred body of a mother. Just before impact, the mother got down between the seats and wrapped her self around her child in the hopes that her body would absorb the brunt of the crash. What a picture of Christ who wrapped his body around us on the cross and absorbed the full fury of hell's inferno so that we would live forever. Where does a mother get such jealous passion for her children? I believe that there is something uniquely in mothers that come from the very nature of God.

Years ago I had an elder who was the head of the Texas Prison system. He told me that no matter how heinous the crime, or how bad the prisoner, he had hardly ever seen a mother abandon her convict son or daughter. Everyone else might give up on that prisoner as a lost cause, but not a mother. God is like that with us. If ever this church could take heart in God's presence, it has been in these past few weeks of our *Bridge to the Future* campaign. I believe that God has birthed this church. Like a mother, he is jealous for us Covenant. The Lord *our* God is with us. Do you remember the question Moses posed to his fearful followers: "Has God brought us this far to let us die in the desert?" A mother would answer, "No way!"

2) His power is always at our disposal

Verse 17 goes on: "...he is mighty to save." Again this is the picture of parents. From a child's perspective, parents are giants, towering above everything. They are overpowering, ever-present, and all knowing. I remember Rachael constantly peppering me with questions. I thought I would go crazy during that period when she kept asking, "Why?" Then my heart melted when I overheard her saying to a little friend, "My daddy is the smartest man in the whole world. I think he might be the strongest too." Somewhere along the line that changed. When she became a teen I suddenly didn't know anything as far as she was concerned. During that time she was painfully aware of my weaknesses, and often told me so. Now she is a stressed-out first year student in law school, and often calls her mother and me for counsel and encouragement. It's good to be bigger in her eyes again. Sometimes we are like 13 year-olds. We forget that our Heavenly Father is "mighty to save." Then we come up against the testing times when we are stripped of our own self-sufficiency. We step out in faith at his command and attempt something so big that it is doomed to failure unless he is in it.

And we have no choice but to trust in him alone. And we find, as we have discovered in these past weeks, he is indeed “mighty to save.”

3) He delights in us

Verse 17 continues: “He will take great delight in you.” Parents take great delight in their children. Children are our legacy. They are the greatest source of both our joy and pain. Do you want to engage people in animated conversation? Ask them about their children or grand-children. What mother doesn’t swell up with pride when people gather around her baby and go on and on about how beautiful that child is? I wish you could have seen the delight in Bob and Martha Lutz last Friday when their daughter Lauren Nichole led Naples High School to the regional tennis title. They’re beaming right now even as I talk about it. More than anything, a parent takes delight in their children’s successes. God delights in us when we step in faith and do his will. He will turn over heaven and earth to make sure that we are successful. Normal parents never want their children to fail. Neither does God want us to step out in faith and obedience, only to fall down in embarrassment. I believe that God delights in what this church is attempting in our *Bridge to the Future* vision. That’s why he has blessed us so richly, even in spite of our own clumsiness and mistakes. He is pleased with his children when they exercise passionate faith in his promises.

He calms our fears

Verse 17 says, “He will quiet you with his love.” Again Zephaniah is speaking the language of parents and children. Babies cry. Children are afraid of the dark. They need to be constantly assured by a mom and dad. A little boy falls down and scrapes his knee. He immediately runs to mommy. He needs her to shush his bawling, wipe away his tears, and kiss away his pain. A girl’s heart is broken by her boyfriend. She needs a dad who will wrap her in his arms and tell her that there are lots more boys out there who will see that she is the most beautiful girl in the world. As individuals and a church we face an uncertain future. These are not easy times to read the *Wall Street Journal* or watch *CNN* (or *Fox News*). As a church we are stepping out in faith because we believe that God has called us to reach the next generation. We have laid out a plan that is risky, costly, and faith-stretching. But God has calmed our fears. I was scared to death to launch this campaign. But God calmed my fears over the past several weeks. And today, as we received the good news of pledges and giving more than six times our annual plate offering, we are all quieted by his love.

He rejoices over us with singing

Verse 17 ends with, "...he will rejoice over you with singing." This is one of the most amazing claims in the Bible. God actually sings. Most of us never knew that. But, when you think about it: where does music come from? I believe that it comes from God who created us in his image. We sing because he sings. We compose music because music comes out of his heart. It's the very nature of creation to make music and song because it is the Creator's very nature. What inspires a mother to sing lullaby to her child? Songs are the expression of the heart. A mother looks down at her baby and is so overwhelmed with joy that she sings out of her passion. A father finds pride and delight in his children and there's a spring in his step, a song in his heart, and he begins to whistle a merry tune. Sometimes a child is restless or angry or fearful, or in pain, and a mother sings a song to sooth that baby's spirits. I remember being in the room with Lois DeVries just before she died. She and Ed had fought the good fight over years of Lois' illnesses. Lois loved the Lord so much, and was in constant pain. We had chosen to die at home in her bed. Joyce took her hand and began to sing hymns over her. You could see the soothing calm that came over Lois and also calmed Ed. As I watched Joyce I saw an image of God who sings over us. And this morning I believe that he sings over Covenant with joy. I am convinced that whatever the outcome of this step of faith, it is significant and pleasing to God. The good news that we share this morning is a song of delight from a God who is pleased with his children.

4. His passion gives us certainty for an uncertain future. We read in verse 16, "On that day they will say to Jerusalem, 'Do not fear, O Zion, do not let your hands hang limp.'" Times like today should be treasured in our memories. Like Jerusalem of old, we have seen God do a mighty thing in our midst. We have passionately stepped out in faith, and he has passionately responded. He hasn't given us yet everything we need. God still wants us to move forward into uncertainty because he wants us to grow in our faith. He is jealous for us to cling to him, and not get proud and distant in our self-sufficiency. So he doesn't give us what we need all at once. We will still have to trust him, and spend a lot of time in prayer, and take some more risks on this journey to the future. But our hands can't hang limp, or our hearts grow fearful. He has shown us today that he is with us. In the days ahead let's remember today. Dear Oprah, our God is a jealous God. And for that we will praise him with passionate celebration!