

28 March – the 6th Sunday in Lent – Palm Sunday

JESUS: THE SON OF THE FATHER (Hosea 11, Lamentations 3)

In the preceding weeks, our focus has been on the Lord Jesus Christ and his heart, which we have looked at under five different headings. How does all that fit in with the Old Testament, which to some extent seems rather different in the way it describes who God is and what God does? Is all that we have said about Jesus true also of God the Father? We will investigate some passages from the Old Testament to help us.

1 Hosea 11:1-11 God's love for Israel

Here we have a description of God's own people in their sinfulness, a focus on God's heart and an affirmation of God's holiness (see especially verses 7-9). We might sum all this up by saying that here we see that it is *'in consideration of his people's sins that God's heart goes out to them in compassion.'* (p.72).

God's people (called both *Israel* and *Ephraim*) have proved to be wayward again and again (v.7). So what happens 'inside of God'? ***We see 'the deeply affectional convulsing within the very being of God. His heart is inflamed with pity and compassion for his people. He simply cannot give them up. Nothing could cause him to abandon them. They are his.'*** (p.73).

God's emotional life We see from the Bible that God is big and mighty and transcendent! But what does it say about God's emotional life? *'God is not a platonic ideal, immovably austere, beyond the reach of meaningful human engagement. God is free of all fallen emotion, but not all emotion or feeling whatsoever.'* (p.73-4)

In some versions of the Bible (ESV and NRSV) v.8 is translated, 'My heart grows warm and tender.' This is in the light of his people's

sins. Who could have imagined that the holy God was like this? Does not our sin provoke God's displeasure and frustration, even anger?

'We tend to think that because God is God and not us, the fact that he is holy renders it all the more certain that he will visit wrath on his sinful people' (p.74). Let's allow God to tell us who he is: 'The sins of those who belong to God open the floodgates of his heart in compassion for us. The dam breaks. It is not our loveliness that wins his love. It is our unloveliness.' (p.75).

What a unique tunnel into the heart of God! He is a God who delights in mercy!

2 Lamentations 3

Here is another text which leads us to the heart of God our Father. This is a book which is carefully structured. (Note number of verses in each chapter: each chapter is an acrostic – there are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet.) The literary high point is **v.33 of Ch.3**, the middle of the book and the heart of its message. Surrounding this verse, we see assurances of God's eventual mercy and restoration of his people whose city Jerusalem has been destroyed by the Babylonians (587BC). The verse talks of God punishing his people in this way, but its language indicates a sense of reluctance in doing this. The verses preceding **v.33** show that when he shows mercy, he does so with his whole heart and with his whole soul (**Jer 32:41**). See **Lam 3:22-28, 31-32**.

What pours out of God most naturally? God's deepest heart – what he delights to do, what is more natural to him – is mercy.

'God is unswervingly just. But what is his disposition? What is he on the edge of his seat eager to do? ... If you catch God off-guard, what leaps out most freely is blessing. The impulse to do good. The desire to swallow us up in joy.' (p.141)

3 Exodus 34:6-7

Who is God the Father? And is he like Jesus? Ortlund says that these two verses in Exodus are *'the high point of divine revelation in all the Bible'* (p.146), not least because these words are picked up time after time in the Old Testament (see eg **Num 14:18; Neh 9:17; 13:22; Psalm 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; Nahum 1:3**).

In all these texts, *'we climb into the very centre of who God is'* (p.146). Here we see God defining his glory in response to Moses' request in Ex 33:18. God's glory, what God is really like, 'his distinctive resplendence', is goodness, mercy and grace. *'The bent of God's heart is mercy. His glory is his goodness. His glory is his lowliness.'* (p.147)

Feast on each phrase:

Compassionate and gracious;

Slow to anger;

Abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness;

Maintaining steadfast love for thousands.

'His anger requires provocation; his mercy is pent up, ready to gush forth. We tend to think: divine anger is pent up, spring-loaded; divine mercy is slow to build. It's just the opposite. Divine mercy is ready to burst forth at the slightest prick.' (p.148)

God says, *'There is no termination date on my commitment to you. You can't get rid of my grace to you. You can't outrun my mercy. You can't evade my goodness. My heart is set on you.'* (p.149)

4 God's deepest heart seen in Jesus

So in these verses, God is opening up to us his deepest heart. The glory of God especially shines in mercy. See also **Isaiah 54:7-8**. But perhaps the final proof of who God is, is found in our four Gospels. Here we see the face of God, the Word becoming flesh. We see his glory, full of grace and truth (**John 1:14**) – identifying Jesus as possessing in fullness the same traits of God which we see in **Ex 34:6**.

'The Lord passed by Moses and revealed that his deepest glory is seen in his mercy and grace. Jesus came to do in flesh and blood what God had done only in wind and voice in the Old Testament. When we see the Lord revealing his truest character in Exodus 34, we are seeing the shadow that will one day yield to the shadow-caster, Jesus Christ, in the Gospels. We are being given in 2-D what will explode into our own space-and-time continuum in 3-D centuries later, at the height of all human history.' (p.153)

Discussion Questions:

1. Read Hosea 11:1-4. How is God's care for his people described?
2. Read Hosea 11:7-9. What do you observe in these verses about who God is? How is God's heart presented? What stands out to you in God's response to his wayward people?
3. How does your knowledge of God's holiness add weight to your understanding of your sin?
4. In what ways is God described in Lamentations 3:22-33?
5. Read Exodus 34:6-7. Can you think of incidents in the gospels in which these characteristics of God are seen in Jesus?
6. How does Jesus 'provide new sharpness to who God is'?
7. Are there ways in which the verses referred to in this study have shown you that you have misunderstood what you have previously seen of God's character?
8. A not-yet-Christian friend asks you to describe Jesus in just a few words. Which words would you choose?

These studies are based on the book *Gentle and Lowly* by Dane Ortlund.