

Garry Williams Love of God 3

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[0 : 00] I don't know if you read novels, but if you've ever read Max Beerbom's novel, Zuleika Dobson, you'll be familiar with the story, but if you haven't let me tell you a little bit about it.

It tells the story of a young woman, Zuleika Dobson. She is a femme fatale, literally, in this case. She comes to Oxford, where her grandfather is the warden of a college, and all the undergraduates of Oxford fall for her, head over heels.

But she has a thing. She'll only love the man who can resist her charms. But gradually they all fall prey to her.

And her greatest, most famous victim is the Duke of Dorset. There is an ancient tradition that on the eve of a Duke's death, two black owls will fly in and perch on the battlements of Tankerton Hall, his family estate.

And at one ominous moment in the story, the Duke, who is the student at Oxford, receives a telegram from the estate from his butler. It says this. Deeply regret. Inform your grace. Last night, two black owls came and perched on battlements. Remained there through night, hooting. At dawn flew away, none knows whither. Awaiting instructions, gellings.

[1 : 28] And the Duke sends back a prompt reply. Gellings, Tankerton Hall. Prepare vault for funeral Monday, Dorset. Later that day, the Duke duke duly drowns himself in the river, sick with love. Then all of his fellow undergraduates, except for one, do the same.

And the last man who survives, fleeing in shame for his cowardly avoidance of suicide, also dies on his way away.

Zuleika Beerbom writes, had taken full toll now. And the novel ends by telling us that Zuleika is leaving Oxford and has booked a train for the next morning to go to Cambridge.

It is a tale of the captivating power of a woman, of the helplessness of lovesick undergraduates. And it's a very witty comedy, but it does also reveal something of how we tend to think of love. For us, love, especially the love between a man and a woman, is something that happens to us.

[2 : 39] Something that befalls us. More precisely, we might say it is something that is evoked from us by its object. So the undergraduates couldn't help themselves. They were helplessly in love.

And I expect that many of us are familiar with this feeling, perhaps especially in the first flush of romantic love. Your loved one fills your thoughts. You can't get her out of your minds.

You're constantly wondering, will your love be reciprocated or not? You're nervous when you see her or him. Like a Roman harrispex, pouring over the entrails of a dead sheep or bird.

You interpret every sign of what she might feel towards you. Because she has captured your heart. And in this kind of love, the lover loves the beloved because she draws out, she evokes this love from him.

There are things about her, her character, her conversation, her manner, her looks, that draw love from the lover. And she has these characteristics really independent of the lover.

[3 : 53] Indeed, she has them before they even meet. And they're the things that in the lover's eyes merit his love for her. Now, this is the way normally of human love. Not obviously in every case, but normally this is the way of human love.

There's more to human love than this, obviously. That won't sustain a relationship. But it is an important part of it. But it isn't the way with God's love. And so we come to another one of our principles of difference.

How God's love is different from our love. Here then we find more of the difference. Now, why is God's love not like this? Well, let me give you some pointers. All of them based or coming out of Paul's words in Ephesians 1, 3 to 6.

So would you turn to Ephesians 1, please? You'll find it on page 1173. Paul writes this, verse 3.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.

[5 : 10] In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ in accordance with his pleasure and will, to the praise of his glorious grace which he has freely given us in the one he loves.

Now, first of all then, notice here how God's love is sovereign love. It's different from our love because it's sovereign love. He is totally in control of his love for us.

He is the sovereign lover. He initiates. He continues. He accomplishes the purposes of his love. It is his work. He never becomes subject, therefore, to an uncontrolled passion in this loving.

This is why if you know the Westminster Confession or if you know the 39 Articles and other such confessional texts, they will tell you that God has no body, parts, or passions. This is one of the big things they're trying to say.

He's never subject to passion. The etymology of the origin of the word passion implies passivity. It implies being passive under something that happens to you rather than active.

[6 : 17] And God is never passive in that way. That is why he doesn't have passions as we have them. He is in control of his love. This is how John Owen puts it.

Consider what is the eternal love of God. Is it an affection in his eternal nature as love is in ours? It were no less than blasphemy so to conceive.

Doesn't God have affections? What does he mean? His pure and holy nature, wherein there is neither change nor shadow of turning, is not subject to any such passion.

It must be then an eternal act of his will, and that alone. So you see when Owen says God doesn't have affection, what he means is he doesn't have a passion to which he is subject, because he is sovereign.

He is in control. And he purposes his love before the object of his love even exists, from before the creation of the world, Paul tells us in verse 4 of Ephesians 1.

[7 : 18] That's when he chooses us. That's when in love he predestines us, before he even creates us. He doesn't wait for some object to come along that will woo him and elicit love from him.

Rather, he purposes, he decrees his love from eternity. It is his eternal choice. It is his act of will in that sense. He chose us in him before the creation of the world.

In love he predestined us. Think of other passages. Have a read through Romans 9 if you want to pursue this. How Paul emphasizes there that it's before Jacob and Esau are even born that God loves Jacob and hates Esau, irrespective of their deeds.

It is God's initiative in love. He is the sovereign lover, first of all. He's in control. Second feature of God's love that we see here is that his love is different because it doesn't change.

As Owen puts it, there's neither change nor shadow of turning in God. It is his fixed, decreed purpose before the world even began. God does not change like shifting shadows, we're told in James 1.17.

[8 : 30] To use the technical term then, God's love is immutable. It cannot mutate. It cannot change. God doesn't therefore fall in and out of love like a human being.

His love doesn't fluctuate like the love of a human being. Thinking of those questions we opened with last night and this morning. There is no variation in God's love. He's not going to love one day and stop loving the next.

His love is fixed before he creates. And that purpose continues and that purpose is accomplished.

As Paul goes on to say in verse 11. In him we were also chosen, having been predestined, according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will. So it's not that God, before the creation of the world, will decide to love, but then something will deflect him from that course. Because he works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.

So God's purpose to love will be accomplished without change or variation. Now you may be wondering at this point, well what does this love look like?

[9 : 41] Because it sounds, is there something troubling here? Does it sound rather static? Does it sound rather stone-like? I don't know if any of you have seen the film *Enemy at the Gates*.

It's about the seizure of Stalingrad. And there's a Russian marksman who stalks the city.

He's called Vasily Zaitsev. He was a real person. I think they fabricated quite a lot of things in the film. But as he's lying there, buried under the rubble, waiting with his rifle, he says, I am a stone. And does this picture of God, sovereign, immutable, suggest that he's rather like that? Is it a kind of Vasily Zaitsev view of God? Where God sits there not moving.

I am a stone. And really quite like a stone, he's a bit dead. Sort of static. Do you see why you might think that? Given that he doesn't change, and he's sovereign.

[10:43] Many fear that. Is that what John Owen thought, when he said that God's love is not an affection? It's not a passion? Well actually, interestingly, not at all, because Owen can make this comment on John 3.16.

God so loved the world. He says, Loved. With such an earnest, intense affection. Hold on, we could have just denied that, didn't we?

Now here he says, with an earnest, intense affection. Consisting in an eternal, unchangeable act, and purpose of his will. For the bestowing of the chiefest good, the choicest effectual love.

What does that mean? God does have an intense affection for his people, Owen is saying. But not that kind of affection, which we identify as a passion, in which we are subject to somebody.

So God has real affection for his people, but he has it sovereignly. In an in control kind of way. So the picture that Owen is drawing here is not a picture of God being dead, and static, and stone-like.

[11:47] He is alive, and we would have to say, he is actually maximally alive. God is more alive than any other being. Think about us.

Think about my life. 39 years of my life have gone. They are lost to me. However many years ahead I have, I don't have yet.

I have actually now, and now, and now, yes? We've lost the past, we haven't yet got the future, we live in the present. And so we don't have all of our life at once.

But God, who is the creator of time, and stands outside of time, being non-temporal, has entire possession of his whole life. He's not passing through time, bound by time like we are.

He is present in every time, but he's not passing through time like we are, just in the present. And so losing lots of his life, and not yet possessing lots of his life, he being beyond time, has his entire life, all at once, if we can put it like that.

[12:50] So God isn't dead at all. His unchangingness, his immutability, is the total possession of his entire life. He is maximally alive. He is more alive than any of us are.

The best I can do to illustrate this, is to think of a box, cardboard box, and you know those wooden blocks that children play with.

Imagine your life and my life. At any point, it's as if we take five blocks, and put them in the box, and we close the lid, and we shake the box, and they're all rattling around. Yes?

Because we've only got a bit of our life, at any one time. So all the blocks are rattling around in the box, changing position, tumbling around. God's life, to imagine God's life, imagine taking the number of blocks that fill the box up completely.

All of his life is there. It's so full. And then close the lid, and then shake the box. And what happens? They don't change. They don't move around. And that's not because there's anything missing.

[13:52] We're the ones with something missing. He's got all of his life there in the box, and that's why there's no change, because he is maximally alive. Not because he's, in some sense, static, or dead.

So his love is immutable, secondly. Sovereign, firstly, immutable, secondly. And that doesn't mean that he's dead. It's because he is more alive than any of us.

Thirdly, God's love is different, because he loves those he finds unlovely. Actually, the opposite.

And therefore, his love, we might say, is a beautifying love.

His love is a beautifying love. He doesn't choose us, because we appear so beautiful in his sight, so lovely in his sight. Rather, his love makes us lovely.

He finds us dead in sin, and chooses to make us holy. This is what Paul says, in Ephesians, isn't it?

[14:55] He chose us in him, before the creation of the world, because he saw that we were holy, and blameless, and delightful. No, not at all. He chose us in him, before the creation of the world, to be holy, and blameless, to make us, holy, and blameless, which we were not.

Martin Luther put this well, writing in 1518. The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it. The love of man comes into being, through that which is pleasing to it.

And Luther got it from Paul. So God's love is a, holy making love, not a holiness finding love. He does not find us beautiful, he beautifies us.

Now this can be hard to accept, can't it? And I think this is one of the things that, non-Christians find hardest to accept. It may be the thing you found hardest to accept. Because it's humbling.

That actually we, we're not worthy of God's love. There's nothing in us to elicit his love, for us. It finds no ground in us. When he looks at us, actually he, he, even in the language of the Bible, we wouldn't even say in the language of the Bible, he only hates our sin.

[16:10] We would say in the language of Psalm 5, he hates us. You can't just separate your sin off, can you? You are the sinful creature. We don't deserve to be loved.

He bestows beauty on us. So God's love is a sovereign love, an immutable love, and a beautifying love. And a lot of these themes come together in Ezekiel 16.

I wonder if you turn to Ezekiel 16, on page 841. This amazing passage, in which we find a picture of the history of Jerusalem, and which you can apply to all of the Lord's people.

The word of the Lord came to me. Son of man, confront Jerusalem with her detestable practices, and say, this is what the sovereign Lord says to Jerusalem. Your ancestry and birth were in the land of the Canaanites.

Your father was an Amorite, and your mother a Hittite. On the day you were born, your cord was not cut. Nor were you washed with water to make you clean. Nor were you rubbed with salt, or wrapped in cloths.

[17:30] No one looked on you with pity, or had compassion enough to do any of these things for you. Rather, you were thrown out into the open field. From the day you were born, you were despised.

Then I passed by, and saw you kicking about in your blood. And as you lay there in your blood, I said to you, Live.

I made you grow like a plant of the field. You grew up and developed, and became the most beautiful of jewels. Your breasts were formed, and your hair grew. You were naked and bare. Later I passed by, and when I looked at you, and saw that you were old enough for love, I spread the corner of my garment over you, and covered your nakedness. I gave you my solemn oath, and entered into a covenant with you, to bless the Sovereign Lord, and you became mine.

I bathed you with water, and washed the blood from you, and put ointments on you. I clothed you with an embroidered dress, and put leather sandals on you. I dressed you in fine linen, and covered you with costly garments.

[18:36] I adorned you with jewellery. I put bracelets on your arms, and a necklace around your neck, and I put a ring on your nose, earrings on your ears, and a beautiful crown on your head. So you were adorned with gold and silver.

Your clothes were of fine linen, and costly fabric, and embroidered cloth. Your food was fine flour, honey and olive oil. You became very beautiful, and rose to be a queen, and your fame spread among the nations, on account of your beauty.

Because the splendor I had given you, made your beauty perfect, declares the Sovereign Lord. So God finds a filthy, discarded, neglected Jerusalem, with nothing attractive in her.

See the initiative of his sovereign love. He creates her. He gives her life with his word. Just as he made Adam live.

He says live. He grows her. He promises to her. He gives her covenant. He clothes her. He makes her beautiful. Your fame spread abroad among the nations, because the splendor I had given you, made your beauty perfect.

[19:55] And his love doesn't change, as the passage continues, because it continues quite a long way through the chapter. When Jerusalem sins, she is cast off. But later in the passage, the Lord affirms his unchanging purpose for her, in verse 60.

Yet I will remember the covenant I made with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish an everlasting covenant with you, despite who she is in her sin.

It is a vivid depiction of, a gruesome, frightening depiction, really, of Jerusalem's history, showing how the love of God is sovereign, is beautifying, and is immutable in its covenant purpose.

So, if God loves us sovereignly, as an act of will, if he loves us immutably, and if he makes us beautiful in loving us, does he then have what we might call delight in us?

You see the question? If his love confers beauty on us, and gives it to us, does he ever actually love us? Does he love us as we are?

[21 : 09] Well, the old writers have a helpful distinction here, between what they call the love of benevolence, and the love of complacency. Benevolence and complacency.

A love of benevolence is a good bestowing love. A love in which in your benevolence, you give good to somebody. A love of complacency is a good finding love, where you find something good in someone, and delight in it.

You are complacent in it. It's not a negative use of the word complacent, it's just an old-fashioned use of the word complacent. A love that finds something to love in the object, and delights in it, is complacent.

A love that gives something to the object, is benevolent. Now, if we ask then, exactly how does God love us, and does he delight in us? We're asking a question that can be helped with this kind of distinction.

Because God clearly has a love of benevolence for fallen creatures, doesn't he? He is benevolent to us. He confers good on us. It is his benevolent love to us when he rescues us from our sins.

[22 : 18] When he clothed Jerusalem, it was an act of benevolent love. When he beautified her and made her a queen, it was an act of benevolent love. And his action towards us in the Lord Jesus Christ is clearly the love of benevolence, giving us the good of forgiveness and redemption and life.

But what about the love of complacency, and that's where the puzzle is, isn't it? Does God love us? Does he delight in us with a love of complacency? And I think the answer must be, as he finds us, no, not really.

And certainly it's not a love of complacency which moves him to save us. He finds us full of sin and under his wrath. He does not delight in us in that condition, in what he finds in us.

The Bible is full of testimony to God's hatred for sin and indeed for sinners. Does he then ever delight in us?

If that's how he finds us, and he doesn't find anything to delight in us when he finds us, does he ever delight in us? Must we give up the idea that God delights in us? Well, let's ask a slightly different question and work our way back to an answer.

[23 : 37] Where is loveliness found? Is there someone in whom God might delight with a love of complacency, delight in what he finds in him?

Can we think of such a man? Well, I take it that we can. There is one man he finds lovely and he loves his own son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

With this man, God is well pleased. with a love of complacency. This is my son whom I love. With him I am well pleased.

The Father finds in the Lord Jesus Christ, the God-man, the one sinless man in whom he can delight with a love of complacency.

Most of all, he finds Christ to be this as he goes to the cross, when his obedience reaches its height. As he goes to death in obedience to his Father, his Father finds most to delight in, in him.

[24 : 46] The Father then has a complacent delight in what he finds in his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. does that mean, just as an aside, that he's lost control of his love at that point?

But now here is an object to which the Father becomes subject, like the Duke of Dorset, which is like a Dobson.

I don't think so, because the Son is God himself. So it's not God becoming subject to someone outside of God and falling head over and heels in love for someone outside of God. God is loving himself when the Father loves the Son.

So it's not as if the Father has become subject to a creature in any respect. So he's not controlled by someone outside of himself. He loves, in fact, his own image in his Son, doesn't he?

He was made in the exact representation of the Father's being, Hebrews 1, verse 3. So that God the Son is lovely in the eyes of God the Father as he reflects the Father's own being.

[25 : 55] So he's not mastered by a creature. The Father loves his own beauty reflected back to him in his Son. Now in a man, this might be narcissism.

But God's love is again different. We shouldn't love ourselves. Actually, because we're not worthy of love in that way. But God should love himself like that.

Because he is worthy of love. In fact, you could even go so far as to say if God doesn't love himself, if the Father doesn't love the reflection of himself in his Son, then God would be sinning, wouldn't he? He'd be failing to love what is lovely, what is supremely lovely.

He is infinitely lovely. And so he must be loved even by himself. So the Father delights in his own likeness in the Son. And in doing that, he's doing what is right and good and what he should do. So, thinking about our question, does God have a complacent delight in what he finds in us? No. Does he ever have a complacent delight in us?

[26 : 59] Well, he has a complacent delight in the Lord Jesus Christ. And what do you know about the relationship between us and the Lord Jesus Christ? Remember, we've talked already about our union with Christ, our being brought together with Christ, decreed in eternity, realised in history as the Holy Spirit unites us to Christ, so that we are included in Christ.

So what happens then? When God the Father delights with his Son, when he is well pleased with his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. When we are included in Christ, he therefore delights with a love of complacency in us in Christ.

We are in and with Christ, chosen in him, Ephesians 1 again, before the creation of the world, crucified in him, raised with him, Colossians 2, Romans 6. Our life is now hidden with Christ in God. All that we are, we are in Christ. So God does take delight in us as people now relocated in Christ. Christ. When he finds us dead in sin, there's nothing to delight in. When we are included in Christ, there is. So God's love for us is not only the benevolent love by which he gives good to us, it is also complacent love by which he delights in us, because he finds us, if you like, in Christ in whom he delights.

[28 : 35] And so as he delights in the head, he delights in the body. But you may think, well, it's not really satisfying, because does that mean that he doesn't really delight in us?

He only really delights in Jesus. He doesn't delight in the real me, the real sinful me. He delights only in the sort of somehow pretend me who's hidden in Jesus.

Well, God forbid that you should ever think that way about yourself. Never, ever think that the real you is the sinful you.

That is a cruel lie of Satan, which he uses to torment us. The real you is the you in Christ, hidden in Christ.

Christ. All of your sin is a remnant of your old self, which has been decisively crucified and put to death at your conversion.

[29 : 43] So that the real you is you in Jesus, raised in Jesus. That is the flesh. That is not you. The real you is in Christ.

So, when God loves you with a complacent delight in the Lord Jesus Christ, he is delighting in the real you, the new you, the deepest you, if you like.

Now, think about that for a moment, because it is an extraordinary thought, isn't it? That God the Father delights in you in Christ.

What do you know about the relationship between the Father and the Son? We talked about it this morning, didn't we? The Father loves the Son from eternity. With a perfect, complete, unparalleled love.

It is literally an immortal love. And now you are in that Son. He has plucked you out of Adam and he's redefined you in Christ so that he now loves you with that love that he has for his Son.

[31 : 03] So he loves you extraordinarily with the same immortal love, the same complete, perfect, superabundant love with which he loves his eternal Son.

That love that pours eternally between the persons of the Trinity that I talked about yesterday.

God's very being is revealed to us in Scripture as an eternal overflowing fountain of love.

And we, by being in Christ, are loved within that love. love. We are bathed in that fountain of the Father's love for the Son.

We are therefore loved, you are therefore loved, with an infinite, unmeasurable, eternal, perfect, complete love.

And this, surely, is the gospel for us this evening. Let's pray together.