

The Bible & Life

Bible Teaching Newsletter

BIBLICAL DOCTRINE & NEW TESTAMENT ASSEMBLY LIFE

Vol. 31. No. 2

March 1, 2024

God's Love For Israel

By David Dunlap

No love surpasses the love of God for the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God's love for Israel is unparalleled in human history. It is a powerful and unchangeable love that stretches from eternity past to eternity future. It is a love that was not deterred by Israel's unfaithfulness and failure. God's love to Israel was not based upon shifting emotions, but upon the steadfast character of God. Love is said to be measured by what we give to those whom we love. The Lord showed this matchless love in the promises that He gave to Israel, in His protection and faithfulness, and finally, in giving His Son, the Messiah and King of Israel. The Lord God unfolded this love for Israel very early in the Bible, when He said:

The Lord thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto Himself, above all people that are upon the face of the earth. The Lord did not set His love upon you nor choose you because you were more in number than any people; for you were the fewest of all people. But because the Lord loves you... (Deut. 7:6-8).

The love God showed to Israel was extraordinary. God had chosen to love Israel, not because there was anything special or deserving in her, but because of the richness of His love and the wonder of His grace. It was simply and only because God had set His eternal love on Israel. These were the people whom He had chosen to love; these were the people with whom He had made an everlasting covenant. Since His love was not based upon anything worthy in Israel, there would also be nothing unworthy in them that could sever them from His love. His love for them was eternal and unconditional; therefore, it was a love rooted in the immutable character of God Himself.

Throughout the Bible, God has beautifully portrayed His love for the nation of Israel in many ways. He has used the songs of David to touch the hearts of His people with His love. He has used His sovereign deliverance during the days of Esther and Mordecai to remind Israel of His faithful love. He has used His promises recorded by the patriarchs and prophets to stir the hearts of the Jewish nation. God has also used three Hebrew idioms in Scripture so that Israel might never doubt the depth of His love.

"The Apple of My Eye"

The writers of the Old Testament mention the idiom "the apple of My eye" on three occasions. It is first used by Moses in Deuteronomy: "He found him in a desert land, and in the wasteland, a howling wilderness;

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Deuteronomy 7:6-8

He led him about, He instructed him, He kept him as *the apple of His eye*" (Deut. 32:10). Later, in the Psalms, King David writes, "Keep me as *the apple of Thy eye*, hide me under the shadow of Thy wings" (Ps. 17:8). Much later in the Old Testament, the prophet Zechariah tells us, "For thus saith the LORD of hosts: 'After the glory hath He sent Me unto the nations which spoiled you: for he that toucheth you toucheth *the apple of His eye*' " (Zech. 2:8).

The original Hebrew for this idiom *'ishon* (Deut. 32:10, Ps. 17:8) can be literally translated as "little man of the eye." This is a reference to the tiny reflection of yourself that you can see in other people's pupils. Some believe the meaning of *'ishon* can also include dark and obscure, as a reference to the darkness of the pupil.

This Hebrew idiom is surprisingly close to the Latin version, *pupillam*, which means, "a little orphan girl," and *pupa*, signifying a "girl" or "little doll." It was applied to the dark central portion of the eye within the iris because of the tiny image of oneself, like a puppet or marionette, that one can see when looking into another person's eye. In Zechariah 2:8, the Hebrew phrase used is *bavah*. The meaning of *bavah* is disputed. It may mean "apple"; and if so, the phrase used in Zechariah 2:8 literally refers to the "apple of the eye." Many believe that our English word "eyeball" may be derived from the Hebrew idiom the "apple of the eye."

This phrase "he that touches you touches the apple of His eye" in Zechariah 2:8 refers to that which God will do to those who have pillaged His people. Israel is truly a people over whom the Lord exercises very special care. Those who touch Israel will receive divine judgment and punishment. The individual or nation that turns against Israel will have the blessing of God removed from him and will face God's judgment. This should remind us all of how the Lord views anti-Semitism.

Why does God use this idiom to refer to His love for the nation of Israel? Some believe that it speaks of that which is delicate, easily injured, and the most demanding of protection. This might speak of the nature of the nation of Israel, who needs the protective and sovereign love of the eternal God. Bible scholar Dr. Charles Feinberg insightfully writes:

*As is well known, the eye is one of the most complex and delicate organs in the human body. The pupil is the most tender, the most easily injured, and the most important to the eye. The loss of it is irreplaceable. Through it light comes to the retina of the eye for vision. What a fit symbol for Israel this is!*¹

The apple of the eye is a beautiful, figurative expression of that which must be tenderly cherished as the choicest treasure.

"My Son, Even My Firstborn"

God uses two familial names that speak so poignantly of God's faithful love for the nation of Israel. Firstly, in the family of nations, Israel is God's "firstborn." The Bible uses the term "firstborn" to describe a family's eldest son. Israel was also called God's firstborn son. The Lord instructs Moses to say to Pharaoh: "Thus saith the Lord: 'Israel is My son, even My firstborn son...let My son go, that he may serve Me...' " (Ex. 4:22). God did not ever call an individual Israelite a "son of God", but He did say this of the nation, "Israel is My son, even My firstborn." The term firstborn implies priority or preeminence, as well as an inheritance. As God's first-

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Charles Feinberg
(1909-1995)
Old Testament Scholar

born, Israel had unique privileges over all other nations. Israel has been chosen to be a channel and instrument of blessing to the other nations of the world. Gentiles were “blessed” only in relation to their kindness to Israel. However, the prophet Isaiah saw a day when Israel would have a “double portion” of inheritance (Isa. 61:7). Concerning this “double portion,” John Wilkinson (1824-1894), the founder of the Mildmay Mission to the Jews, London, and the author of the classic work *God’s Plan for the Jews*, writes:

According to Deuteronomy 15, in the distribution of property the ‘first born’ was entitled to “a double portion.” Responsibility is measured by position and privilege, hence the principle of “double portion” in God’s dealing with Israel. Upon Israel’s national conversion and fulfillment of her mission, God says to them “For your shame ye shall have double...in their land they shall possess the double: everlasting joy shall be unto them” (Isa. 61:7).²

Secondly, God tells us that Israel was His “son.” Before the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, no individual Jew ever seemed to have thought of God as his or her personal Father. Jesus habitually called God “My Father”, which made a great impression on the minds of His disciples. Near the end of His ministry, He charged His disciples to do the same: “Go to My brothers and tell them, ‘I am going to My Father and your Father, to My God and to your God’” (John 20:17).

One of the most tender of all verses which speak of Israel as a “son” is Hosea 11:1, where we read, “When Israel was a child, then I loved him and called My son out of Egypt ...” In this verse, God begins to speak of His father-love for Israel. He reminds the people that they became His, not by birth, but by adoption. He loved them and called them, and therefore, they should love Him. Moreover, God did not just adopt His people; He also cared for them in the days of their spiritual infancy, as a father cares for a son. This is the way God describes His love for Israel:

“It was I who taught Ephraim (Israel) to walk, taking them by the arms; but they did not realize it was I who healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love; I lifted the yoke from their neck and bent down to feed them” (Hosea 11:3,4).

Beyond doubt, the love of God for Israel is steadfast, sure, and faithful through all the vicissitudes of life.

“Israel, My Glory”

God’s love for Israel is again seen in the Jewish nation’s most elevated title: “Israel, My glory.” The Bible refers to Israel as the “apple of His eye” and His “firstborn” and His “son”, but no title better unfolds the value and the high regard in which the Lord holds the nation of Israel than “Israel, My glory.”

The prophet Isaiah comforts Israel, declaring that the Babylonian nation which once enslaved her would be destroyed. The Babylonian gods Bel and Nebo would be no match for the strong arm of the Almighty God. In Isaiah 46:12-13, God speaks of the Babylonians as “stout hearted”, and those “far from righteousness,” and foretells their defeat by the Persians. God would bring against unrighteous Babylon His righteousness, that is, King Cyrus, the executor of God’s righteous will.

***“ God speaks of
the elect nation as
‘Israel My Glory’.
Israel has been
appointed to
glorify God. He
has chosen that
nation above all
the nations of the
world for His
glory. He loves
them with an
everlasting love. In
His plan, God has
chosen Israel to be
a holy and
everlasting
nation..”***

Lewis S. Chafer
(1870-1952)

March 2024

INFORMATION

Bible and Life is published periodically and sent out free of charge and is supported entirely by the free will offerings of the Lord's people. Checks should be made out to "Bible and Life Ministries, Inc."

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This would result in salvation for Zion and deliverance from exile for Jerusalem.

"I bring near My righteousness; it shall not be far off, and My salvation shall not tarry: and I will place salvation in Zion for Israel, My glory" (Isa. 46:13).

God promises to place salvation in Zion and make Jerusalem a place of safety. Israel shall shine in splendor and beauty because of her Champion. In a future millennial day, Israel will shine in her brightest glory. Israel, the chosen of God, the beloved of God, and the recipient of His everlasting salvation, will shine in radiant glory. In that day, Israel will have the glory of God upon her; the glories of God will be displayed through her. Therefore, Israel may truly be called "Israel, My glory."

Conclusion

The love of God for the people of Israel is abiding, steadfast, and everlasting. His calling of Israel and His covenant to them is a pledge of His faithfulness. He assures, "My covenant will I not break, nor alter the thing that is gone out of My lips" (Ps. 89:34). At the heart of His covenant is a guarantee of His love and commitment. Even though Israel may fail and be unfaithful, His love for her remains steadfast. His promise is His bond. Why is it that God remains faithful to His promise? Firstly, it is because God is God! Secondly, it is because He has chosen them to be His people. We read, "For thou art an holy people unto the Lord thy God, and the Lord hath chosen thee to be a peculiar people unto Himself, above all the nations that are upon the earth" (Deut. 14:2); and again, "For the Lord hath chosen Jacob unto Himself, and Israel for His peculiar treasure" (Ps. 135:4).

Endnotes

1. Charles Feinberg, *Zechariah*, (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1952), p. 281
2. John Wilkenson, *God's Plan for the Jew*, (London, UK: Paternoster, 1946), p. 74