

# God's Heart

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Date: 21 February 2016

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Over the last couple of Sunday mornings we've been looking at the imagery that the Bible uses to describe God. About three weeks ago we looked at God's hand. The Bible very often speaks about God's hand and it's an image of strength and power. And God uses that strength and power for our benefit. It means that he is always with us, his hand is always upon us, his hand is always protecting us, his hand provides for us and his hand indeed takes us and holds us as his very own possession. God has abundant strength, abundant power and he uses that power and strength for us. And then we saw the image of God's face last week and as we said last week it's an image of both openness and of closeness. In your face you are opening yourself up to other people. They can see you, they can see your emotions, they can see your expressions, they can see your concerns and in the same way God is opening himself up to us and revealing himself to us through his word. And the reason he does that is because he wants us close to us. Remember how we said nothing compares with being face to face with someone that you love and that's what God wants with us. He doesn't want us at a distance, he wants us close. So we've seen God's hand, we've seen God's face and today we're going to look at one last of these images. And this one is a much rarer one. It's not that frequent in the Bible but it is possibly the most important one of all.

Today we're going to think about God's heart. We read about that in Hosea chapter 11 verse 8 and we're going to come back to this verse later on. How can I give you up O Ephraim? How can I hand you over O Israel? How can I make you like Adma? How can I take you like Zebojim, these cities that were destroyed? My heart recoils within me. My compassion grows warm and tender. Now the imagery of the heart is very, very important in the Bible and again like with God's hand and with God's face it's something that we can connect with because we use the language of the heart as well.

And we can begin by saying that there's three things that we think of when it comes to your heart. The first thing is that your heart is where you hold the things that really matter to you. If something is really important to you then we speak of it in terms of our heart. The Bible speaks in the same way. We have examples in Psalm 37 verse 4. We sang this verse, delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart. The things that we really want are things that we desire in our heart. Psalm 77, I said let me remember my song in the night, let me meditate in my heart. If you're thinking about something really important then it's on your heart. And in our studies in Luke we came across the version chapter 2 where Mary treasured up all these things. They were obviously very important so where did she have them? She pondered them in her heart. So your heart is where you hold the things that really matter and that's why we often see the phrase with all your heart. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart. And that's emphasizing that it's not something that we do half-heartedly. It is something that we do with our whole being. If you do something with all your heart you are doing it with all that you are. It is something that is of the utmost importance and priority and we see it in the Bible and we still use the same language today. We'll talk about doing something and you say I put my heart into it. I put my whole heart into whatever it was that I was doing. And that means that if you want to know what really matters to you then you look in your heart. That's why God says man looks on the outward appearance but the Lord looks on the heart. And at this point we have to emphasize the fundamental point that this is the level of analysis that we are interested in here in church. We are not here to have a sort of superficial chat about biblical things or lessons in life. We are not here to talk about things that don't really matter. We are here to talk about the most important things in your life. We are here to think about what really, really matters. That is the level that we are interested in in church as we come round God's word. And so we all have to stop and ask ourselves the question what really matters in your life?

[ 5 : 47 ] What really matters? It is so, so easy for us to go through life drifting along. So, so easy for us to be distracted by various things and we can go from one day to the next day, from one week to the next week, from one month to the next month and we just, we distract ourselves and we fill our minds with things that aren't really that important. And we can go along in that way for such a long period of time and we have to stop and think when did I last ask myself? And when did you last ask yourself what are the things that really, really matter in your life? And are you putting these things first? The heart is where we think about the things that really matter. But secondly, your heart is where you feel the pain of things that really hurt. The greatest pain of all is the pain that we feel in our hearts. The Bible uses the heart to describe our emotions and that of course can be in a positive sense. It can be joyful. Therefore my heart is glad and my whole being rejoices. My flesh also dwells secure. You'll see that quite often in the Bible, positive emotions are conveyed in terms of the heart. But it is used also to explain experiences of pain and anguish. Nehemiah 2.2, the king said to me, why is your face sad seeing you're not sick? This is nothing but sadness of the heart. Nehemiah could not hide the pain that was in his heart. Likewise, first time in the 28, when Saul saw the army of the Philistines, he was afraid and his heart trembled greatly. And we use the same language today. When you really are worried about something, we speak about having a heartfelt concern. And when you are really devastated about something, we say that you are broken hearted. And I'm sure that you all know that the pain of a broken heart is the worst pain of all. What would you choose? A broken leg or a broken heart? I think we all know what we would want. And maybe that's how you feel today.

Maybe, maybe you feel like that today for whatever reason, maybe your heart is sore, maybe your heart is broken. And if you do feel like that, then you can come to God and find comfort and find help and find one who really does understand. Psalm 147 verse 3 has these beautiful words. He heals the broken hearted and binds up their wounds. If your heart feels wounded, then God is the one who is here and willing and longing to bind up those wounds and to heal the broken hearted. Your heart is where you feel the soarest pain of all. And that is the pain that God wants to comfort. God wants to help you where you need it the most. So at heart is where we hold the things that really matter. Our heart is where we feel the pain of things that really hurt. And thirdly, your heart is what moves you into action. The Bible uses the term heart to refer to our emotions and to our intellect, but it goes further than that because Scripture also makes a key link between our heart and our actions. According to the Bible, the things that you do are an outworking of the state of your heart. For example, Exodus 25 tells us that people obey as a result of their hearts. The Lord said to Moses, speak to the people of Israel that they take for me a contribution. For every man whose heart moves him, you shall receive the contribution for me.

People obey God as a result of the state of their heart. And the opposite is true as well. People disobey God because of the state of their hearts. We see that very clearly with Pharaoh. When Pharaoh saw that there was a respite, that was in the 10 plagues, when one of the plagues had stopped, he hardened his heart and would not listen to them, as the Lord had said. And Jesus sums this all up perfectly when he says, what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart. And this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person. So there's a fundamental connection between our hearts and our actions. And we can see this in our own lives because if your heart is where you keep the things that really, really, really matter to you, then that is what's going to shape your actions and your conduct. If something is really important, it will shape the way you act. I remember once hearing of a mother who was watching her child at swimming lessons. And at the pool, there was a sort of viewing gallery. Higher up, the pool was down low and a bit like how it used to be in the old sports centre for those of oldies like me who can remember that. You could look down and see the pool. But in the old sports centre, there was glass, but in this one, it was open.

It was just a railing. And so you could hear everything that was going on in the pool. And the children were having lessons. And this mother's child was trying to swim across and they were just learning. So they weren't very good. And while he was going across the pool, another child who wasn't very good at swimming grabbed on to this mother's boy in order to sort of help himself along. And so the wee boy was trying to swim, but he had another wee boy holding on to him, which of course was making him sink and he couldn't swim. Now while this was going on, the lifeguard was actually talking to somebody else and hadn't seen what was happening. And the mother was up in

the gallery with loads of people everywhere, all around, but she clapped her hands and shouted and said, look, help him. She didn't care what everybody said. She didn't care that everybody could see her. She didn't even have to think twice.

[12:51] She saw that somebody was in need. And because it was what mattered to her heart, she acted upon it. And so if something really matters to us, then we will act upon it.

And that's why it's never quite right if somebody says, I believe in God, but it's just between me and him. And it doesn't really have any effect on my life. I've got what's between me and God is between me and God. And the rest of my life, I'll just live as normal. That doesn't really fit because of something really matters to you. It should shape the way you live. It should influence your actions. That's why Jesus said that each tree is known by its fruit. And if our hearts are devoted to God, as I hope all of our hearts are, then that should bear fruit in our lives.

So our heart, just in terms of our hearts, point to three things. Our heart is where we hold that which really matters. Our heart is where we feel the pain of that which really hurts. And our heart is what shapes and moves our actions. And I'm sure that we can all relate to these three things.

They are true of you and they are true of me. But the amazing thing is that the Bible reveals us to us that these three things are also true of God. These three things are what you find in God's heart.

And so for the rest of the time, we'll think about this together in more detail.

As we said at the beginning, the imagery of God's hand and the imagery of God's face is very common. But the imagery of God's heart, although it's common in reference to people, is not very common in terms of describing God. The references to God's heart are rare. But even though they are rare, they are incredibly important and they reveal the same three things that we have just identified in terms of our own hearts. So we see that first of all, God's heart is where he holds onto that which really matters. The things which really matter to God are a matter of his heart. We sang about that in Psalm 33 where it says, the council of the Lord stands forever, the plans of his heart to all generations. God's heart is where his plans are made. That's where his desires and his purposes lie. And that immediately tells us all that there are things that really matter to God. That's why when God spoke about David, he said, it says that the Lord has sought out a man after his own heart and the Lord has commanded him to be prince over his people. To be after God's heart is to be in line with God's plans, with God's purposes, with God's desires. There are certain things that really matter to God. And of course, there are many, many of these that we could identify, but we don't have time. But there are three fundamental points that arise from this. The first point is that this, the fact that there are certain things that matter to God means that we cannot have any manmade ideas about the nature and character of God. The Bible tells us that there are definite and certain truths about the nature of God. In other words, there are things that he is and there are things that he isn't. And that of course is possibly the most basic truth about

[17:01] God. And yet it is one of the most common mistakes that the world makes. Because we decide what God is like. We choose which parts of the Bible we want to accept. And we determine the terms and conditions on which a relationship with God is based. You see that everywhere. You people who say that they believe in God, but they believe in a God who is shaped by their own ideas.

But it's completely illogical because God is God. He is who he is. And therefore, it is his prerogative to reveal his nature. And we are to listen and to learn. We are not to impose our own manmade ideas upon the nature and character of God. We also see that the fact that there are certain things that matter to God show us that there is absolutely no possibility whatsoever of God being untrustworthy, unreliable or changeable. And this is where God is such a wonderful, wonderful contrast to the world around us. Because how often are we victims of other people changing their minds and other people changing their plans? That can happen at a personal level where somebody has said that they're going to do something and then they won't do it. And it can happen at a national level where a politician can say, I'm going to do this and then they don't do it. And we go through so many parts of life facing half-hearted promises from people and we can be let down. In fact, probably one of the biggest causes of broken hearts is the fact that people made you promises and they didn't keep them. And yet God is never like that. God is never half-hearted.

There are things that really matter to God. His plans are in his heart. His commitment is absolute. His consistency is uncompromising. That's what the Bible says. He's a God of truth and that he's a God of righteousness. He sticks to the things that really matter to him. And we also see from this that we cannot in any way view God as detached or uninterested in the world. We can very often

think that God maybe made the world long ago but now isn't bothered what happens. That's not true because God's heart tells us that what happens in the world matters to God. And so when you see things happening in the world, when you see awful reports on the news of horrendous events that are taking place with the migrants or in other parts of the world or whatever it may be, never ever think that God looks at that with indifference or that God is unmoved by what is going on, what matters in the world is of the utmost importance to God. And so God's heart is an image that's telling us that there are things that really, really matter to God. If you could look into God's heart today, you would find absolute truth. You would find total righteousness. You would find the highest level of consistency that you can imagine. And you would find an uncompromising commitment to fulfilling his purposes and carrying out his plans. God is who he is. God's heart is where his plans and purposes lie. But the Bible also reveals that God's heart is where he feels the pain of that which really hurts. We said that at the start, our heart's where we keep what's important. Our heart is also where we feel the pain of what really hurts. And whilst we must be cautious when we discuss the concept of God experiencing pain, because we have to remember that God is God and we are not. And there'll always be a difference between our own experiences and what God experiences. Yet at the same time, the imagery of God's heart is pointing us in the direction of telling us that God's heart is where he experiences the pain of that which really hurts. Now, in order to understand this, we need to just look very quickly at the big story line of the Old Testament. Across the whole of the Old Testament, there's a big story line that runs through all the books. And we can just remind ourselves of what that is. It starts at the beginning with creation. God made the world. But not long after that, when we get to Genesis chapter 6, 7, 8, 9, we read all about the flood, Noah's Ark and everything that took place then.

Then the flood subsided. And as the flood subsided, God began to fulfil his purposes in a specific area with a specific person. He called Abraham out of the land of Ur of the Caldees, as it was called, which is basically where that little stick man is around the kind of area. God called Abraham out of that area and brought him to the land of Canaan. And there, he promised him that his descendants would have that land. And so eventually, Abraham's family grew. Isaac was born. And Isaac himself had children. Esau and in particular, Jacob. This is taking us about halfway through Genesis. Then as we go through the second half of Genesis, we read how Jacob's family grew and he eventually ended up in Egypt. Famine forced Jacob and his family down to Egypt. Whilst he was in Egypt, the nation grew. Jacob's family grew into a vast nation. But as we know, that nation fell into a position of slavery and oppression under the Egyptians. And then that brings us to Exodus, where we have the wonderful story of how God's people were redeemed and brought out of the land of Egypt, the Exodus. And all of that culminates with them entering into the Promised Land, which is what we have here. God's people entered the Promised Land and there, they were to live as God's people. But when you go through the Old Testament, you'll find that instead of doing that, they constantly didn't. They constantly rebelled against God. And one of the consequences of that was that David's grandson, Rehoboam, which was the son of Solomon, you had two kings. David was the first, well, Saul first one, but David in many ways was God's first appointed king. He was king, then Solomon became king, then Rehoboam became king. And when Rehoboam became king, the nation split in two. You had the northern kingdom, Israel, and you had the southern kingdom, Judah. And the continual story was one of rebellion. The people, particularly in the north, but the south weren't that much better, rebelled against God. And eventually the northern kingdom was destroyed, as Sennacherib came. This is when the prophecy of Hosea was written. The northern kingdom fell, that was in 722 BC. And then about 140 years after that, in 586 BC, the southern kingdom was also conquered. The people were taken away into exile. We'll go back one story. I was too too quick there. The people were taken away into exiles. It's quite interesting to see that they ended up back more or less where Abraham had been called from in the first place. That's the big storyline of the Old Testament. That's really what happens all the way through. And within that big storyline, there are three great acts of judgment. In that storyline, three big acts of judgment.

[ 25 : 37 ] The flood, first of all, and then the fall of the northern kingdom, and then the fall of the southern kingdom. These were acts of judgment that God had to bring upon his people. And the incredible thing is, is that in each of these three events of judgment, we are told something about God's heart. In each of these three, we are told about God's heart. The flood, the Lord saw the wickedness of man was great in the earth. That every intention and the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the Lord regretted that he had made man on the earth and it grieved him

to his heart.

The wickedness of man grieved God's heart. So the Lord said, I will blot out man who might have created from the face of the land man and animals keeping things and birds of the heavens for I am sorry that I have made them. But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord, God's heart at the flood. Same at the fall of Israel. That's what we read in Hosea chapter 11 verse 8. How can I give up on you Ephraim? That's referring to the northern kingdom. How can I hand you over to Israel? My heart recoils within me. And then we see the same again at the fall of Judah. That's when the prophecy of Jeremiah was written. Is Ephraim my dear son? He's my darling child. For as often as I speak against him, I do remember him still. Therefore my heart yearns for him. I will surely have mercy on him, declares the Lord. Of all these times of judgment, we see references to God's heart. And what are they all saying? They are saying that in God's heart, there is something that hurts. What causes God's heart to be hurt when he has to judge sinners? Now that is incredibly important for us to bear in mind. It's so often to think that God is cold and harsh and doesn't think twice. But these verses are telling us something different. And it's something that you all must know about God. And if you know anything about God, he is wanting us to make absolutely sure that we know that he takes no pleasure in the death of anyone. That's what Ezekiel 18:20 says. I have no pleasure in the death of anyone declares the Lord God. So turn and live. That's what God's heart is saying. [28:22] And the words of Hosea chapter 11 are particularly astonishing in this regard. It's one of my favorite chapters in the whole Bible. It is an amazing chapter. At the start of the chapter, it speaks about what plans and intentions God has for his people. Well, he said, was a child I loved him out of Egypt. I called him my son. That's the big storyline.

People being brought his people being brought out of Egypt. But the more they were called, the more they went away. They kept sacrifices, sacrifice into the bills and burning offerings to idols. Yet it was I who taught them to walk. I took them by their arms, but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of kindness, with bands of life. God led the people. God helped them. That was what he wanted for his people. But the more he did that, the more they went away. And that's what the next part of the chapter says, that they shall not return to the land of Egypt, but a city that was the northern country that conquered the kingdom of Israel. A city I will be their king because they've refused to return against me. The sword shall race against their cities and consume the barge of their gates and will devour them. My people are bent on turning away from me. The people continually rebelled and God had no option but to bring judgment. And all that can seem so clinical and all of it can seem so mathematical. And God is simply being consistent. He warned them of judgment. And it's the same when you have a child, if they're doing something wrong, you warn them, you warn them, you warn them. And if they keep doing it, you have got to give them a row. Otherwise, all your warnings are meaningless. God is simply being exactly the same. He was being true to his word. But verse eight tells us how all this made God feel. And he says, how can I give up? How can I hand you over? My heart recoils within me.

Now this should change the way we all think about God. God has been the subject of so many false caricatures over the years. And maybe even you in your own mind have got false impressions of what God is like. And an example of that is one I'm sure you're all familiar with the poem that Robbie Burns wrote, Holy Willie's Prayer. I'm sure you've heard it. Although that in the heavens does dwell, as it pleases best thyself, sends one to heaven and one to hell, all for thy glory. [31:07] Now I don't know if that was Robert Burns' own view of God, but many people have that view of God, that he simply throws one to heaven, one to hell and doesn't care. If that is your view of God, you are wrong. Because the Bible reveals to us what is going on in God's heart when judgment comes.

And God is not gloating, God is not smiling, God is not taking an ounce of pleasure in it. Even the judgment of foreign nations was a grievance to God. Jeremiah 48 says, My heart mourns for Moab. Moab was a country that caused the Israelites all sorts of problems, but yet when they were judged, God says his heart mourns for them. When judgment comes, when judgment comes on the human race that God has made, his heart is sore.

Now that is an unbelievably important truth. And if you learn anything from coming to church, then I hope that you know this, that in God there is the most intense desire. In God's heart, there is the most intense desire that you will not go to hell. In God, there is the longing and the desire that you will not be lost. And that's why anyone who does go to hell, which people do, because people die in

rebellion against God. But people who do go there, do so by their own do.

They do it by their own doing. And that's part of the horror of hell, because there you will know that you only have yourself to blame. And when something bad happens in your life, when something goes wrong, it's awful. But it is a hundred times worse when you know it was your own fault. When you do something wrong and you think, I could have avoided that, it makes the whole situation so much worse. And I hope that you all know that at the very heart of God, there is love, there is compassion, and there is the deepest, deepest devotion to you.

Now you might not feel that anybody in the world is really devoted to you, but I can tell you that God is. God is devoted to you. And God earnestly desires that you will put your trust in him.

[ 34 : 03 ] And God's heart longs and waits for you to believe in him. Your preciousness to God is absolutely immense. And yes, our sin will inevitably bring punishment. Our sin makes us guilty before God and God has his standards that he must stick to, otherwise he would cease to be God. But at the same time, in God's heart, yes, sin must be punished. But alongside that, there is the overwhelming desire that we would escape punishment. And if you think about that, there's almost attention in God's heart. He has his standards, the things that matter to him. God cannot tolerate sin. We are sinners. That creates a massive problem between us and God. And yet at the same time in God's heart, we are the object of his affection. And he has such a longing and a desire for us. And so there's this tension, almost a conflict revealed to us in scripture within the heart of God.

But this is where we come to the final piece of the jigsaw, because God's heart has moved him to act. Our heart is what shapes our action. If we are sinners, we stand guilty before God, and God must be true to his heart in judging us. But if we are judged, we will be lost, and God's heart will be broken. Therefore, God has taken action.

And that's why we have the cross. And there on the cross, God was through to his heart. Sin was punished in the way that it had to be. Sin was dealt with in the way that it had to be.

But sinners are saved. And you can be saved because of that cross, because on that cross, God himself has taken outplace. Jesus has carried our sins. And because of that, we can be given his righteousness and God's heart is totally satisfied. And so if you want to see God's heart, then look at the cross, because there you will see that God will never compromise in regard to sin.

But you will also see that God will never compromise in regard to saving his people. God will not compromise in saving you. And that's what we read at the very start of the service.

[ 36 : 43 ] Grace and peace to you from God, our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins. You can read that and put your own words, your own name in it. God gave himself for me to deliver me from this present evil age, because that was the will of our God and Father to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen. On the cross, God is showing you that his heart is totally and completely devoted to you. You, you have a place in God's heart.

You have a place in God's heart. But does God have a place in your heart? God's heart is devoted to you. But is your heart devoted to him?

These three images that we've looked at over the last three weeks, give us everything that we need. God's hand tells you that he has the power to save you and to help you in your time of need. God's face tells you that it doesn't matter what is in your life. He is opening himself up to you.

You cannot surprise him. You cannot put him off you. You cannot do anything that will make him remove this offer of salvation from you. He wants you to come to him as you are. And he wants to draw you close to him and to hold you close forevermore. And God's heart tells you that he loves you, that he will always love you, and that he will always be faithful to his promise of salvation.

God's hand, God's face, God's heart are all towards you today.

[ 38 : 44 ] And may God grant that their hearts are towards him. Respect.