

“God is not Out to Get You”

The LORD your God is with you. He is mighty to save! He will take great delight in you, He will quiet you with His love. He will rejoice over you with singing! (Zephaniah 3:17) ¹

What do you think about when you hear the word, “sparrow”? I suppose most of us think about the very small and very common birds that we see pretty much everywhere—if we know what to look for; but there are other things, too. Baltimoreans might think of the formerly great ironworks on Sparrows Point in Baltimore. I think of the formerly great factories in which Raytheon built Sparrow missiles for the Navy in Bristol, Tennessee, not far from our house.

Sparrows Point and Sparrow missiles are both very interesting, but I want to invite your attention this morning to those little (mostly) brown birds. The African-American spiritual that is our focus on this second Sunday of Black History Month is well-known, and it is strongly connected with those little birds. You know how it goes . . .

Why should I feel discouraged, why should the shadows come?
Why should my heart be lonely, and long for heaven and home,
When Jesus is my portion? My constant friend is He.
His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me;
His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me.

*I sing because I'm happy,
I sing because I'm free,
For His eye is on the sparrow,
And I know He watches me.*²

Patricia Raybon’s comment on this song and painting goes like this: “Why should I feel discouraged when every bird in the sky and every flower on the road and every hair on my head and every song in my mouth all remind me that God’s eye, when you stand back and think about it, sees Christ in me? And in you. So let’s sing together!”³



In Matthew’s version of our text from Luke, Jesus asked, “What is the price of two sparrows—one copper coin? But not a single sparrow can fall to the ground without your Father knowing it. And the very hairs on your head are all numbered. So don’t be afraid; you are more valuable to God than a whole flock of sparrows” (Matthew 10:29-31).

Those words are full of comfort. Our problem comes with what Jesus said right before that, and both Matthew and Luke record it so: “Don’t be afraid of those who want to kill your body; they cannot do any more to you after that. But I’ll tell you whom to fear. Fear God, who has the power to kill you and then throw you into hell. Yes, he’s the one to fear” (Luke 12:4-5).

Both of these statements are true: God is both loving beyond all imagining and holy beyond all measure. And the way in which we understand Who God Is affects everything else in

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on February 12, 2017. The inspiration for this sermon is an African American Spiritual taken from Timothy R. Botts, *Bound for Glory: Celebrating the Gift of African American Spirituals through Expressive Calligraphy*, with reflections by Patricia Raybon (Carol Stream, Illinois: Tyndale House, 2011).

² *His Eye is on the Sparrow*, Words by Civilla Martin, 1905; music by Charles Gabriel.

³ Botts & Raybon, p. 68.

our lives. In their book, *America's Four Gods*,⁴ Paul Froese and Christopher Bader describe four ways in which we Americans put these two dimensions together:

1. **The Authoritative God.** *The Authoritative God* is very involved in the world to help people and does judge those who do evil in this life. Even so, God is loving, and is seen as a Father figure. Froese and Bader say that 31 percent of Americans have this view.
2. **The Benevolent God.** *The Benevolent God* is very involved in this world to help people but does not feel anger toward evildoers and does not judge anyone. Twenty-four percent of Americans hold this view.
3. **The Critical God.** *The Critical God* does not involve Himself in the affairs of this world or of its people, but He does take careful note of how people live and will judge them in the afterlife, holding them to account for evils done. Sixteen percent of Americans have this understanding of God.
4. **The Distant God.** *The Distant God* is more of a “cosmic force” or a “higher power” than a person. This God created everything but is no longer engaged in the world and does not judge its inhabitants.⁵ Froese and Bader note that persons who consider themselves to be “agnostic” fall into this category, which includes 24 percent of Americans.
5. Five percent of Americans are atheists.

Where would you put yourself in such a schema? As we continue to ponder these things, I'd like to add three more Scriptures to our consideration. These verses help us to understand what God is really like:

- In Jeremiah 29:11, God said, “*For I know the plans I have for you. They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope.*”
- In Hebrews 12:2, we're told that “*Because of the JOY awaiting him, [Jesus] endured the cross, disregarding its shame,*” and we've noted before that the JOY of which the Scripture speaks is the Joy Jesus experienced even in His suffering as He created the path by which we, His Beloved Ones, could spend eternity with Him.
- But the verse where I really want to land this morning is that verse which is my favorite in the entire Bible. The verse is Zephaniah 3:17, and it goes like this:

*The LORD your God is with you.
He is mighty to save!
He will take great delight in you,
He will quiet you with His love.
He will rejoice over you with singing!*
(Zephaniah 3:17)

Commenting on this verse, Jeremy Treat wrote that “Our view of God greatly dictates the way we live. If we see God as a cosmic police officer, then we will live in fear of punishment. If we view God as a heavenly firefighter, then we'll talk to him only when we're in trouble. But if God is the mighty warrior who sings over his people, that changes everything.

⁴ Paul Froese and Christopher Bader, *America's Four Gods* (Oxford, 2010).

⁵ Those who hold this view are often called “Deists.”

“Imagine if someone asked me how I feel about my kids, and I said, ‘I don’t hate them.’ That’s a true statement, but it’s not enough. I love my kids. I *delight* in them. But when we think of our relationship with the Lord, too often we only think of the things God *doesn’t* think or feel: ‘He’s not mad at me. He forgave my sin.’ But God *delights* in us!

“When I was a young Christian,” Jeremy wrote, “I was motivated by guilt and driven by a sense of obligation. I read my Bible, prayed, and went to church because that’s what ‘good Christians’ were supposed to do, and because God would be upset with me if I didn’t. I was as miserable as I was hypocritical. *But when I finally grasped God’s holy love, it changed my life.*⁶

So let’s read that wonderful verse again. Would you read it with me?

*The LORD your God is with you.
He is mighty to save!
He will take great delight in you,
He will quiet you with His love.
He will rejoice over you with singing!*
(Zephaniah 3:17)

And that brings us back to the second verse of today’s spiritual:

“Let not your heart be troubled,” His tender word I hear,
And resting on His goodness, I lose my doubts and fears;
Though by the path He leadeth, but one step I see;
His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me;
His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me.

This verse has to do with fear, and the Apostle John, whom we sometimes call “The Beloved Disciple,” wrote that “**Perfect love expels all fear.** *If we are afraid [of God], it is for fear of punishment, and this shows that we have not fully experienced his perfect love*” (1 John 4:18).

My friend, Nik Ripken, has told many amazing stories of God’s love and guidance in his book, *The Insanity of God*.⁷ If you haven’t read it, you really should do that at once. This story, while similar to those Nik tells, comes from Michael Ramsden, a co-worker with evangelist Ravi Zacharias:

An Iranian pastor and his wife stopped in a small village to purchase some water. As he entered the store, the pastor noticed a man holding a machine gun and leaning against the wall outside the store. The pastor’s wife looked at the man’s face and the gun, then put a Bible in her husband’s hand and said, “Give that man this Bible.”

Her husband looked at the man again—at his menacing beard and the machine gun—and replied, “I don’t think so.” But she persisted: “I’m serious. Give it to him. Please, give him the Bible.”

Trying to avoid the issue, the husband said, “Okay, I’ll pray about it.” He went into the shop, purchased the water, climbed back into the car, and started to drive away. His wife looked at him and said, “I guess you didn’t give him the Bible, did you?”

⁶ Jeremy Treat, “God Is Not Out to Get You: Listening to the Father who delights in and sings over us,” *Christianity Today*, November 2016, 64-67.

⁷ Nik Ripken, *The Insanity of God: A True Story of Faith Resurrected* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2013).

“No, I prayed about it and it wasn’t the right thing to do.” She quietly said, “You should have given him the Bible,” and then she bowed her head and started praying. At that point, her husband turned around and said, testily, “Fine! If you want me to die, I will.”

The man with the machine gun still leaned on the wall. The pastor approached him and placed the Bible in his hand. When the man opened it and saw it was a Bible, he started to cry.

“I don’t live here,” he said. “I had to walk for three days to get to this village. But three days ago, an angel appeared to me and told me to walk to this village and wait until someone had given me the Book of Life. Thank you for giving me this book.”⁸

“Let not your heart be troubled,” His tender word I hear,
And resting on His goodness, I lose my doubts and fears;
Though by the path He leadeth, but one step I see;
His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me;
His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me.

If you’re a baseball fan, you may know the name, Jeremy Brown. Jeremy was the catcher for the *Oakland Athletics*, and he was terrified of running the bases. He is most remembered for a game in 2002 in which he, planning for a double, slipped and fell on first base, and, while scrambling to get back on first, was notified that he had, in fact, hit a home run.⁹

Jeremy’s experience serves well as a metaphor for this second verse of *His Eye is on the Sparrow*. Jesus has already hit the home run that brings us Home. His righteousness has already been credited to our account, and we are now at peace with God. We don’t have to live in fear, crawling back to and clinging to “first base.” We can jubilantly run the race laid out for us, heading confidently toward Home (Hebrews 12:1-2)!

Well, our song has one more verse:

Whenever I am tempted, whenever clouds arise,
When songs give place to sighing, when hope within me dies,
I draw the closer to Him, from care He sets me free;
His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me;
His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me.

It was late on a warm Saturday afternoon when the familiar but dreaded call came: “This is ADT Security Services. There is a burglar alarm at the St. Matthews Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky. Can you meet the police there?”

For five years, my life had been punctuated by such calls at varying hours of nights and weekends. Once or twice, there had actually been someone in the building, but never a burglar. On one occasion, I had arrived to find one of our members in handcuffs. He had neglected to tell the custodian that he was practicing the piano in a far-off corner of the campus, and the custodian had locked the building and set the alarm. I wondered what it would be this time.

The alarm control panel indicated activity in the sanctuary foyer, a large space with windows soaring toward thirty-foot ceilings. There had been a wedding that day, and the foyer

⁸ As you might imagine, this pastor became a much more courageous witness for Christ; and he was eventually martyred for his faith. Michael Ramsden, “An Uncompromising Faith Lived Out with Grace,” *Just Thinking*, 1.26.09.

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jeremy_Brown

doors had been open for a while to the pleasant afternoon breezes. Deceived by the expanses of glass, a sparrow had flown into the foyer and was still trapped there. He had tripped the motion detectors in his attempts to escape.

The police left me there with the bird. I opened four doors at right angles to each other and about fifty feet apart, hoping the bird would find his way to freedom. Then I sat down to watch what happened. For the most part, the bird repeated his flights toward the upper reaches of the glass, his internal senses telling him that this was the way to freedom. From time to time, though, he would fly between the plants at either side of the doors.

A brisk breeze was flowing through the doors, pointing the way toward escape, and the sparrow flew through this breeze many times, only three feet from freedom. But because he expected escape to be toward the sky, the bird never understood the meaning of the breeze. After about an hour of this, I locked the doors, turned off the alarms in the foyer, and went home, reflecting on the parable I had witnessed. (I finally got the bird out the next day.)

As I drove home, I remembered the words of Scripture, “*There is a path before each person that seems right, but it ends in death*” (Proverbs 14:12); “*You can enter God’s Kingdom only through the narrow gate. The highway to hell is broad, and its gate is wide for the many who choose the easy way. But the gateway to life is small, and the road is narrow, and only a few ever find it*” (Matthew 7:13-14).

Now while those verses are certainly true, the central thing to remember is that **God has already opened the door. The Wind of the Spirit is blowing, and the Way to Life stands open before us.** And we have a Father in Heaven who delights in us and whose heart yearns for us to come through that gate into the wonders He has prepared. I close with the words to my favorite anthem, inspired by my favorite verse:

And the Father Will Dance! ¹⁰

*The LORD your God is with you.
He is mighty to save!
He will take great delight in you,
He will quiet you with His love.
He will rejoice over you with singing
(Zephaniah 3:17).*

And the Father will dance over you in joy!
He will take delight in whom He loves!
Is that a choir I hear, singing the praises of God?
No! The Lord God Himself is exulting o’er you in song!
And He will joy over you in song;
And He will joy over you in song!

My soul will make its boast in God,
For He has answered all my cries.
His faithfulness to me is as sure
As the dawn of a new day.
Awake, my soul! Awake, my soul!
Awake, my soul, and sing!

¹⁰ *And the Father will Dance*, words and music by Mark Hayes. www.jwpepper.com/1484666.item

Let my spirit rejoice!
Let my spirit rejoice!
Let my spirit rejoice in God!

Sing, O daughter of Zion, with all of your heart!
Cast away fear, for you have been restored!
Put on the garment of praise, as on a festival day.
Join with the Father in glorious, jubilant song!

And He will joy over you in song!
And He will joy over you in song!
And the Father will dance over you in joy!
He will take delight in whom He loves!
Is that a choir I hear, singing the praises of God?
No! The Lord God Himself is exulting o'er you in song!

God rejoices over you!
God rejoices over you!
God rejoices over you in song!