

“Who is like Me?!” sayeth the Lord

The “Impossible” God – Beyond our wildest hopes, dreams, and expectations!

The Unexpected God

“Who is like Me?” says the Lord?

One: No one expected to encounter a God and survive!

“Now search all of history, from the time God created people on the earth until now, and search from one end of the heavens to the other.

Has anything as great as this ever been seen or heard before?

Has any nation ever **heard the voice of God speaking from fire—as you did—and survived?** [Deut 4:32-33]

“They said, ‘Look, the LORD our God has shown us his glory and greatness, and we have heard his voice from the heart of the fire. Today we have seen that God can speak to us humans, and yet we live!

But now, why should we risk death again? If the LORD our God speaks to us again, we will certainly die and be consumed by this awesome fire.

Can any living thing hear the voice of the living God from the heart of the fire as we did and yet survive? [Deut 5:24-26]

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By comparison in the ANE:

“Israel’s unique experience with deity. The two aspects the text highlights as unique are the two major features of the covenant: election (vv. 34, 37) and revelation (vv. 33, 35). Yahweh distinguished himself from the gods of the ancient Near East by these actions. The gods of the ancient Near East were sometimes believed to have chosen an individual or a family to favor with their blessing. Usually this would be a king who claimed a particular deity as his sponsor. But without revelation, such “election” is only inference or propaganda. The gods of the ancient Near East did not reveal their long-term plans and were not necessarily considered to have any. They did not reveal what they were like or what pleased or displeased them. All of this had to be inferred or deduced by those who worshiped them. But Yahweh has chosen to reveal himself both through the law (“I am holy, so you are to be holy”) and through his actions (covenant with forefathers, plagues, exodus, bringing them to the land, etc.).

[Victor Harold Matthews, Mark W. Chavalas, and John H. Walton, The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament (electronic ed.; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), Dt 4:32–34.]

“Ancient Near Eastern gods intervened in history, in the lives and affairs of their subjects over whom they ruled. Egypt touted the antiquity of her nation, her ancient past, and her famous heroes. ... However, in at least several ways, the Lord’s actions toward Israel **seem unparalleled in the ancient Near East.** (1) **Yahweh took his people out from another nation** (v. 34); (2) the means he used to accomplish this was unparalleled in variety, quality, intensity, and purpose; (3) the rescue/taking of a people was only one component in a long-term plan stretching over centuries, even millennia.

John H Walton, Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary (Old Testament): Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy (vol. 1; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 448.

By comparison in the ANE:

“The similarities between the Mesha Inscription and the HB that began this essay have been confirmed by our MFT analysis: the religious practices of Moab were consonant in many respects with those of ancient Israel. Surely, this facilitated the ease with which Israelites adopted the worship of Chemosh and other foreign gods and initiated marriage and political relations with non-Yahwists in the Iron Age. The prevailing voice of the HB, though, harshly condemned these engagements with Israel’s neighbors (Neh 13:23–27; 2 Kgs 16; Isa 7).³² Although all six moral foundations appear in the Mesha Inscription and the HB, **loyalty/betrayal and sanctity/degradation are more important in the HB**, and there **are striking differences** in the ways that the MI and HB employ the foundations. Several important categories of difference between these two look-alike deities are clear.

First, the portrayal of Chemosh in the Mesha Inscription **emerges as one-dimensional and superficial**. Chemosh is primarily a god present in time of war, enabling either an aggressive Israel to oppress Moab or a resurgent Moab to drive out her enemies. There is no explanation given for Chemosh’s anger or for his reversal. **Nothing is said about the deity’s character** or the reason for his disposition toward Moab. **He is a cipher and may have been viewed as arbitrary and been feared more than loved**. His relationship with Moab was **driven by the rational exchange of favors between god and devotee**. While the HB presents YHWH as also capable of great violence, **Israel’s God is characterized by justice, faithfulness, and compassion. This God sought not just the respect of Israel but also her love, exclusive devotion, and understanding**.

Second, the Mesha Inscription describes the relationship between Moab and Chemosh **only in the most immediate terms**: the reign of Mesha and perhaps his father. The **HB, though**, repeatedly directs the reader’s **attention to the past, when God made promises to earlier generations**, delivered Israel from Egyptian slavery, and forgave transgressions. **Current events appear only as a point in the stream that continues into God’s future**.

Third, while the Mesha Inscription has little to say about the ethical lives of nations, persons, and even Chemosh—except for its condemnation of Omri and Israel for oppressing **Moab—the HB is rich with commentary about the morality of people and deity**. It is only YHWH who is righteous and holy. The moral lives of nations and even exemplary individuals are frail, even tending to lurch aside into faithlessness. The **HB shows little reticence in condemning even great kings** for their missteps—worship of foreign gods, military alliances with other kings, and oppression of their own subjects. Yet, in the mystery of God’s sovereignty and grace there is the desire to restore Israel in holiness and righteousness and even use them to bless all nations.

“YHWH and Chemosh: An Investigation of Look-Alike Gods Using the Moral Foundations Theory”, by M. Patrick Graham, in **Divine Doppelgängers (YHWH’s Ancient Look-Alikes)** (p. 126). Penn State University Press. Kindle Edition.

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Two(a): No one expected forgiveness, mercy, or divine favors ‘for free’ from a god -- they were always ‘bought’ with sacrifices and rituals and groveling in the ancient world. Example of Noah after the Flood:

“Then Noah built an altar to the LORD, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar. The LORD smelled the pleasing aroma; and the LORD said to Himself, “I will never again curse the ground on account of man, for the intent of man’s heart is evil from his youth; and I will never again destroy every living thing, as I have done.”

“The contrast between the biblical and ancient Near Eastern accounts [of the Flood] is more distinct on this point than on any other. In the Gilgamesh Epic the gods have apparently neglected to realize that with all humans destroyed, no one will be left to give them sacrifices. Without sacrifices they are deprived of their sustenance. Consequently, when the sacrifice is offered after the survivors disembark from the boat, “the gods smelled the sweet savour, the gods gathered like flies around the sacrificer.”

“...sacrifice is not food for God. This is important because in the Gilgamesh Epic, the destruction of mankind deprived the gods of the food and drink offerings on which they depended to sustain their immortal existence. According to that text, when “the gods smelled the sweet savor,” they “crowded like flies around the sacrifice”.

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Two(b): No one expected forgiveness, mercy, or divine favors ‘for free’ from a god -- they were always ‘bought’ with sacrifices and rituals and groveling in the ancient world. Example in Babylonian satire:

VII) “Servant, listen to me.” “Yes, master, yes.” “Quickly, get me water (to wash) my hands, please, (55) so I can sacrifice to my god.”

“Sacrifice, master, sacrifice. The mind of the man who sacrifices to his god is at ease. He is **making loan upon loan.**”

“No, servant, I will not sacrifice to my god.”

“Do not sacrifice, master, do not sacrifice. (60) **You get your god to follow you about like a dog**, whether he wants you to perform rites or (says) ‘Do not consult your god,’ or anything else.”

James Bennett Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (3rd ed. with Supplement.; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969)

Two(c): No one expected forgiveness, mercy, or divine favors ‘for free’ from a god -- they were always ‘bought’ with sacrifices and rituals and groveling in the ancient world. Psalm 50 -- Completely Unnecessary!:

God says, “My people, listen to me;
Israel, I will testify against you. I am God, your God.
I do not scold you for your sacrifices.
You always bring me your burnt offerings.
But I do not need bulls from your stalls
or goats from your pens,
because every animal of the forest is already mine.
The **cattle on a thousand hills are mine.**
I know every bird on the mountains,
and every living thing in the fields is mine.
If I were hungry, I would not tell you,
because the earth and everything in it are mine.
**I don’t eat the meat of bulls
or drink the blood of goats.**
Give an offering to show thanks to God.
Give God Most High what you have promised.
Call to me in times of trouble.
I will save you, and you will honor me.” [Psalm 50:7–15]

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Three: No one expected God to care about us, as opposed to just rituals to serve HIS needs:

“It logically follows that the gods’ behavior must also have been a reflection of human behavior... the gods’ needs, which were similar to our own: eating and drinking, clothing and ornamentation, the desire for an opulent and carefree life in big and luxurious ‘houses’ amid celebrations.” (Bottero)

“Is this what you call fasting? Do you really think this will please the LORD?”

“No, this is the kind of fasting I want:

Free those who are wrongly imprisoned; lighten the burden of those who work for you.

Let the oppressed go free, and remove the chains that bind people.

Share your food with the hungry, and give shelter to the homeless.

Give clothes to those who need them, and do not hide from relatives who need your help.”

[Is 58:5–7]

“Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? declares the Sovereign LORD. Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?”

“Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent and live!

[Ezek 18:23 and 32]

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Four: No one expected God to be the One seeking us – Pagan Gods almost never left their abode except for war ... never for healing, restoring, or building beauty– they sent others to do the work.

- I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak... I myself will judge... [Eze 34:15–16]
- I am the good shepherd. ... And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. [John 10]
- The Son of Man has come to seek and save the lost [Lk 19.10]
- The LORD says, “I made myself known to people who were not looking for me. I was found by those who were not asking me for help. [Is 65.1]

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Five: No one expected God to be ‘fair and reasonable’ about His rules.

- Hezekiah asked Lord to allow a second Passover for those who could not participate in the first one - punishable by death. [2 Chron 30]
- God told the priest-prophet Ezekiel to use unclean fuel for a symbolic cooking act; Ezekiel begged for a substitute and God allowed it. [Ezek 4:9-15]

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Six: No one expected God to be ‘more than fair’—to be merciful and a peace-maker.

- Jesus said “take my yoke upon you, for it is light... and you will find rest for your souls.” [Matt 11:28-30]
- God said “I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked – but rather that he should turn and live” [Ezek 16:37; 18:32]
- Blessed are the peace-makers for they shall be called the Sons of God [Matt 5:9]
- But God does not take away life; instead, he devises ways so that a banished person may not remain estranged from him. [2 Sa 14:14]

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Seven(a): No one expected Grace instead of just mercy.

Difference between **MERCY** and **GRACE**

- **Mercy** – a pardon from prison, walks out of the gate a free person, allowed to start again from zero
- **Grace** – a pardon (as above) but a limo meets him at the gate, telling him he has been adopted by the world’s richest person, and heir of unimaginable wealth!

- **Mercy** – having a staggering debt load, with collection agencies after you, and then the creditors all forgive the debt (like in bankruptcy)—you are out of debt and free to try to rebuild
- **Grace** – having someone **PAY** all the debts off, then adopt you as a child of the world’s richest person – with a huge bank account already set up for you.

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Seven(b): No one expected Grace instead of just Mercy.

- Where sin abounded, grace OVER-abounded (not just forgiveness!) – [Rom 5:20]
- God telling Joel that He would not only stop the famine and drought (brought about by Israel’s violation of the contract/Covenant) but that He would even ‘**re-imburse**’ **them for all the lost crops** caused by their disobedience. [Joel 2:25-26]

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Eight: No one expected a god to get His “hands dirty” for us, in creating a path to reconciliation/redemption/LIFE.

- God demonstrates His love ... in that while we were yet ENEMIES, He saved us [Romans 5.6-10]
- God’s judgement on Egypt as ‘stretching out His arm’ [Ex 6:6]
- God so loved the world that He gave his ONLY son [John 3.16]
- Christ had no sin, but God made him become sin so that in Christ we could become right with God. [2 Co 5:21]

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Nine: No one expected a god who “risks His reputation” on us.

- The father of the Prodigal Son would have borne shame from the community for how he watched for and restored his prodigal son.
- The scoffers mock the Lord about the ‘delay’ in His return ... “The Lord is not slow in doing what he promised—the way some people understand slowness. But God is being patient with you. He does not want anyone to be lost, but he wants all people to change their hearts and lives.” [2 Peter 3.9]
- “This is the same point that Ezek. 36:19–20 makes: God’s reputation, his name, is held in contempt because of his apparent inability to defend his people. The seriousness of this contempt is underlined by its continual nature: continually, all day long. But in fact, the allegations were all untrue; God had not failed his people; their anguish was not the result of his inability to deliver them; he had not been forced to sell them.” [John N. Oswalt, The Book of Isaiah]— It was the discipline He had promised in the Covenant.

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Ten: No one expected a god who offered new life (birth and renewal) for free at no cost to us.

- Allow the little children to come to Me – for of such is the Kingdom [Luke 18:16]
- If you do not become as a little child, you shall not even enter... [Luke 18:17]
- Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness, just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works” [Ro 4:4–6]
- “And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price” [Re 22:17].

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Eleven: No one expected a god who Offered new life, new status, co-ownership to everyone – not just the elite.

- Brothers and sisters, look at what you were when God called you. Not many of you were wise in the way the world judges wisdom. Not many of you had great influence. Not many of you came from important families. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and he chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose what the world thinks is unimportant and what the world looks down on and thinks is nothing in order to destroy what the world thinks is important. God did this so that no one can brag in his presence. [1 Co 1:26–29].
- Listen, my dear brothers and sisters! God chose the poor in the world to be rich with faith and to receive the kingdom God promised to those who love him [Jas 2:5]
- His followers thought riches were REQUIRED to please God enough to be saved: *Jesus looked at him and said, “It is very hard for rich people to enter the kingdom of God. It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.” When the people heard this, they asked, “Then who can be saved?” Jesus answered, “The things impossible for people are possible for God.”* [Lk 18:24–27]

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Twelve: No one expected a god who would extend **His presence into our lives.**

- **If people love me, they will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them** (New Century Version Jn 14:23). [“The connection with vv 2–3 is immediately apparent: Jesus goes in death to prepare in the Father’s house a “dwelling,” a “home” (μονή) for those who, like the disciples, keep his word, and he will come again to take them with him to the prepared home; in v 23 the Father and the Son come to the believer in his earthly existence and make their home with him here” (WBC)]
- **The Word became flesh and made his dwelling (“tabernacle”) among us.** [John 1.14];
- In our midst – indwelling the invisible church: **“You yourselves are God’s temple and ... God’s Spirit lives in you”** (1 Co 3:16).” Even though the OT clearly states that the Lord God could not be limited by a temple built by human hands (see 1 Ki 8:27; Isa 66:1–2), the Lord did promise to dwell in the midst of his people in the tabernacle built in the desert and in the temple built by Solomon (Ex 40:34–38; Dt 12:4–11; 1 Ki 8:12–13; 2 Ch 6:20, 41). In the era of the new covenant, however, this temple has been replaced by something new that God himself created, namely, the new people of God composed of those who believe in Jesus. One of the implications of Pentecost (cf. Ac 2:1–4) is that the Lord has now come to live in that body of believers by his Spirit: [EBC]

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Thirteen: No one expected a god who would extend **this presence into our very bodies/minds through the Indwelling Spirit of God.**

- Just as the invisible Church as a corporate body (cf. the Body of Christ) is a temple of the Spirit, so too is the individual BODY such: *Don't you realize that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and was given to you by God?* (NLT, 1 Cor 6.19); “Not only will God raise the human body someday, as he did the physical body of Christ, but he also comes to abide within us through his Spirit. Imagine that! God, through his Holy Spirit, inhabits our bodies! Do we need any further proof that the Lord places a high value on the human body?” (EBC)
- The Spirit of God, who raised Jesus from the dead, lives in you. And just as God raised Christ Jesus from the dead, he will give life to your mortal bodies by this same Spirit living within you. [Rom 8:11]
- The world cannot accept Him [the Holy Spirit], because it does not see him or know him. But you know him, because he lives with you and he will be in you. [Jn 14:17]

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Fourteen: No one expected a god who would use this Presence –Holy Spirit—to even intercede for us, for things beyond our knowledge!

“Also, the Spirit helps us with our weakness. We do not know what to pray for as we should. But the Spirit himself speaks to God for us, even begs God for us with deep feelings that words cannot explain. God can see what is in people’s hearts. And he knows what is in the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit speaks to God for his people in the way God wants. [Ro 8:26–27]

“I take it that Paul is saying, then, that our failure to know God’s will and consequent inability to petition God specifically and assuredly is met by God’s Spirit, who himself expresses to God those intercessory petitions that perfectly match the will of God. When we do not know what to pray for—yes, even when we pray for things that are not best for us—we need not despair, for we can depend on the Spirit’s ministry of perfect intercession “on our behalf.” Here is one potent source for that “patient fortitude” with which we are to await our glory (v. 25); that our failure to understand God’s purposes and plans, to see “the beginning from the end,” does not mean that effective, powerful prayer for our specific needs is absent.” [Douglas J. Moo, The Epistle to the Romans (The New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 526.]

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Fifteen: No one expected this indwelling Spirit of God to actually empower us for LIFE, FREEDOM, and GOODNESS, unlike other indwelling spirits.

When a foreign spirit indwelled a human’s body, it was called ‘possession’ (in the sense of ‘taking control’ and not ‘ownership’) and the impact on the human was horrific. Based on the 6 accounts in the NT: “... the symptoms of demonic possession include: (1) insane ravings (2) self-destructive behavior; (3) the antisocial behavior of nudity; (4) seizures; (5) dumbness; (6) deafness; (7) blindness; and (8) performance of the involuntary function of spirit mediumship” ... to this we add super-human strength. (ISBE)

But the Spirit of the living God produces (or ‘grows’) self-control (not ‘spirit-control’!), freedom, life, and all forms of goodness:

- “But the Spirit produces the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. [Ga 5:22–23]
- “God did not give us a spirit that makes us afraid but a spirit of power and love and self-control. [2 Tim 1:7]
- “The Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom [2 Co 3:17]
- [F]or the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. [2 Cor 3.6]

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Sixteen: No one expected an emotionally rich God—involved in our lives in every facet.

- Many times in the New Testament we are instructed to ‘mimic’ God’s character and behavior in our lives, which implies that the instructions for us are things also done by God..

“Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. [Eph 4:32-5.]

“But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without hoping to get anything back. Then you will have a great reward, and you will be children of the Most High God, because he is kind even to people who are ungrateful and full of sin. Show mercy, just as your Father shows mercy. [Lk 6:35-36]

- Thus, when we read in Romans 12:15 to “*Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep*”, we know that God weeps with us and rejoices with us – as He did in the Old Testament:

He said, “These are my people; my children will not lie to me.” So he saved them. When they suffered, he suffered also. [Is 63:8-9]

But Even Beyond All That...!

“Who is like Me?” says the Lord?

Seventeen: But **ABSOLUTELY** No one would have expected this emotionally rich God to be **emotionally vulnerable to us** -- that we could **cause Him sorrow** over our bad choices.

And do not grieve the Holy Spirit, of God—by Whom you all were sealed, for the day of redemption [Eph 4:30]

And at the second giving of the Law in Deuteronomy, one can hear the sadness in God’s heart as He knows they will veer off into distressing and difficult times:

“The LORD heard you when you spoke to me and the LORD said to me, “I have heard what this people said to you. Everything they said was good. Oh, that their hearts would be inclined to fear me and keep all my commands always, so that it might go well with them and their children forever! “ [Deut 6:28-29]

But Even Beyond All That...!

“Who is like Me?” says the Lord?

Eighteen(a): And no one would have expected this emotionally rich God to be **emotionally vulnerable to us** -- that we could **cause Him pleasure** over our good choices [and not just ‘satisfaction’].

There are many verses about pleasing God. Some from the NT would be:

“May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us **what is pleasing to him**, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. [Heb 13:20–21]

“for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work **for his good pleasure**. [Php 2:13]

“And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and **may please him in every way**: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God [Col 1:10]

“Then, whatever we ask for, we receive from him; because we are obeying his commands and doing the things **that please him**. [1 Jn 3:22]

But Even Beyond All That...!

“Who is like Me?” says the Lord?

Eighteen(b): And no one would have expected this emotionally rich God to be **emotionally vulnerable to us** -- that we could **cause Him pleasure** over our good choices.

But perhaps the most vivid images of God’s rejoicing over us are in the parables:

“Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep but loses one of them. Then he will leave the other ninety-nine sheep in the open field and go out and look for the lost sheep until he finds it. And when he finds it, he happily puts it on his shoulders and goes home. He calls to his friends and neighbors and says, ‘**Rejoice with me** because I found my lost sheep.’ In the same way, I tell you there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who changes his heart and life, than over ninety-nine good people who don’t need to change.

“Suppose a woman has ten silver coins, but loses one. She will light a lamp, sweep the house, and look carefully for the coin until she finds it. And when she finds it, she will call her friends and neighbors and say, ‘**Rejoice with me** because I have found the coin that I lost.’ In the same way, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God when one sinner changes his heart and life.” [Lk 15:4–10]

But Even Beyond All That...!

“Who is like Me?” says the Lord?

Nineteen: And, finally, absolutely no one would have expected this emotionally rich God to delight in us to the point of SINGING!

On that day they will say to Jerusalem,
“Do not fear, O Zion;
do not let your hands hang limp.
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 3:16-17]

“The next portion of this verse may be called a “poem of personal love.” Three parallel lines each containing three phrases express the deepest inner joy and satisfaction of God himself in his love for his people. Delight, joy, rejoicing, and singing on God’s part underscore the mutuality of emotional experience felt by God and the redeemed. ... That Almighty God should derive delight from his own creation is significant in itself. **But that the Holy One should experience ecstasy over the sinner is incomprehensible.**” [Palmer Robertson, NICOT]

**God breaking out in singing!
God joyful with delight!
All because of you.**

How Then Shall We Live?

“Who is like Me?” says the Lord?

If you still think God is just a judge or a stern, absentee Father, think again – realize the impact of the tiniest step of goodness you take, the slightest expression of love, or the mildest mistreatment of another human being UPON HIS HEART.

Everything counts! Every tear is in His bottle, every good deed done in secret is recorded, and every good will be recompensed with over-good (shaken, pressed-down, and overflowing– Luke 6:38)—nothing is wasted.

Our children and loved ones have a huge power to grieve us or cause us to rejoice! God has brought us into such a vital, deep, rich relationship with Himself!

LIVE THAT WAY!