

# Seven Pictures of Divine Tenderness

We read in Ephesians 4:32 that we are to be kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, “even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you.” The phrase “even as God hath forgiven you” indicates something about the infinite tenderness of God in His attitude toward sinful persons.

It is impossible for any of us to totally comprehend the nature of God. The being and attributes of God have always been a profound study. And when we study the nature of God we must be careful not to dwell upon one attribute to the neglect of another. For example, often His mercy is magnified and His majesty is played down; sometimes His love is emphasized and His wrath is denied.

One of the most beautiful and comforting of God’s attributes is that of His tenderness. “Tenderness” is an emotion which expresses warm affection, and seeks to share the joys and sorrows of another. God is a tender God! And the tenderness of God is sadly needed in these harsh, loveless days when tenderness is a scarce commodity among human beings. Look, for example, at the hard and unlovely faces of some of the people who pass by at the market or the grocery store. Such disgruntled people may be unusually intelligent, but they have not discovered the secret of a calm and satisfied life—and surely have not acquired the qualities of gentleness and tenderness.

In Ephesians 4:32, the Apostle Paul (who himself was once a bitter persecutor of God’s people), now urges the Christians at Ephesus to emulate the tenderness of God, when he says: “Be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you.” Our lives should demonstrate the quality of tenderness, otherwise we will find ourselves hard, bitter, unfeeling, and loveless. Contact with the tenderness of God **can soften** our characters. John, (the Son of Thunder) was later transformed into the Apostle of love. The dying thief was likely the equivalent of a modern gangster, but in the presence of Jesus (who was praying for His enemies), the thief was broken up and transformed into a new person.

The Scriptures present us with several illustrations and pictures of God’s tenderness, and hopefully these snapshots of divine tenderness will help us develop a new sense of charity and gentleness in our own daily living.

## 1. An Eagle That Fluttereth

God is described as follows in Deuteronomy 32:11-12: “As an eagle stirreth up her nest, fluttereth over her young, spreadeth abroad her wings, taketh them, beareth them on her wings, so the Lord alone did lead him.” The Children of Israel are spoken of here under the figure of “Jacob” (their father). The passage illustrates God’s instruction and training of Israel during the forty years in the Wilderness. Moses is reviewing those years for the younger generation, just before crossing the Jordan to enter into the land of Canaan. Three aspects of the eagle’s care are indicated here by Moses. (Keep in mind that the eagle builds her nest high above the ground, often as high as the top of a four-story building).

a) The eagle stirs up her nest, compelling the young eagles to fly. Wings that are developed and strengthened in the nest must learn to fly, and so out go the young! The mother eagle destroys the nest twig by twig, until the small eagles are so uncomfortable that they just have to go. And so it is that God sometimes acts toward us; He tears our nest to pieces, especially if we become too settled among the things of the world, and too self-satisfied with our own accomplishments.

b) The mother eagle flutters over her young in order to teach by example how to fly. It almost seems at times like the small eagles (in learning to fly) might fall to their death in a bottomless pit far below, but the mother is determined to teach her brood to use their wings. The mother stays near, and is quickly ready to help the small eaglets if they are in trouble.

c) The mother eagle spreads abroad her wings in order to protect and hide her young from an attack. With her wings, the mother bird can drive off assailants and soar away with her young. At a considerable altitude she will drop the small eagles, compelling them to use their wings—and then, if through any cause they cannot use their wings—she rapidly darts down and places her body beneath the young so that they can rest on her back.

All this is a beautiful glimpse into the tenderness of God. He stirs up our nests; He makes us use our wings; but He constantly shelters us with His strong presence. We face hard places; there are times when the pressure is great and the heat is on—but like the eagle, the Lord undergirds and sees us through! The people of Israel were cast out from their permanent homes in Egypt and brought into the fierce Sinai Desert, but God stood by them and saw to it that none was forsaken. In Deuteronomy 32 God is pictured as an eagle that flutters over her young.

## **2. A Father Who Pitieth**

Another picture of the tenderness of God is given in the 103rd Psalm. “Like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear him. For he knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust” (Psalm 103:13-14).

The Fatherhood of God is a beautiful truth, but it is a reality only for those who have received Christ as Savior. God is fatherly to all people; He sends rain on the just and the unjust; He is responsible for the creation of each person; but in a spiritual sense, He is the Father only of those who are reconciled to Him by faith in God the Son.

There is always a lack in life if one has never had the benefit of a father’s influence. Human fathers know how to pity their children when they are in distress. The tenderness of a good father will cause him to punish a child, but not in wild anger. So it is with God. Often, as a father, I could feel the heartbeat in the arms of our children (when they were small, and they knew punishment was coming). My wife and I are the parents of six children. When one misbehaved, I would hold the wrist tightly and explain the misdemeanor—and a sense of pity nearly always overwhelmed me. So it is with the Lord.

All of our children at some time or other were in difficult settings. One time our second son fell out of the automobile and on to the blacktop highway. Our third son broke his leg while kicking a football

playing by himself in the front yard. Our second daughter had a portion of bone removed from her hip and grafted onto a weak spot on the ankle. Our oldest daughter was thrown from an automobile when rounding a curve on a dirt road. Our oldest son took some nails from a neighbor and had to make an apology. Every honest father feels a tender love for his offspring, and our Father God senses the same kind of tenderness for those who have committed their lives to Him. "The Lord pitieth them that fear him" (Psalm 103:13).

God knows that we are frail and subject to decay, and that we soon sink under a heavy load. He knows that we are easily broken under the pressure of severe trial, and so He tempers His dealings with us, so that we are not tested beyond that which we can bear. "Like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear him" (Psalm 103:13).

### **3. A Bridegroom Who Rejoiceth**

The third picture of the tenderness of God is that of a bridegroom who is in the midst of rejoicing. Isaiah 62:5 says, "As a bridegroom rejoiceth over the bride, so shall thy God rejoice over thee." This is another glimpse into the tenderness of God. Watch the young man as his wedding day approaches. Notice the fond expression when he is in the presence of the girl who will become his bride. There is a rich joy and a deep satisfaction in his soul as he awaits the time when the two shall be united in the bonds of matrimony.

Believers are spiritually joined in marriage to Christ. The bride of Christ is His Church (Revelation 21:9), and some day he is coming to claim His own.

Once a bridegroom takes his bride he is supposed to possess her until death parts them. The bridegroom endows the bride with all his worldly goods, and they become each other's. Thus it is in the spiritual realm: The bride and the bridegroom typify the relation existing between Christ and the Church. As the bride of Christ, the believer has been endowed with all that the Lord Jesus has; we are joint-heirs with Him, but we are physically absent from Him now. Surely we long for the time when He will return to claim His bride, and God's people will enjoy His presence throughout eternity. "As a bridegroom rejoiceth over his bride, so shall thy God rejoice over thee" (Isaiah 62:5).

### **4. The Mother Who Comforteth**

Another picture of God's tenderness is found in the mother that comforts her child. Isaiah 66:13 says, "As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you."

A good mother is a precious person, and a mother's attitude toward her child gives us another insight into the heart of God. It is to the mother that a child usually runs when there are tears to be kissed away. The little poem says:

"Who ran to help me when I fell,  
And would some pretty story tell,  
Or kiss the place to make it well?  
My mother."

God reveals himself in the Bible by using more than three hundred names. One of the names for God is “El Shaddai”—a term which means “the breasted one.” A fretful child will often soon fall asleep upon the tender pillow of a mother’s breast. One of the wonders of the nature of God is the fact that He is able to function both as a father and a mother. Our God combines in one entity all the qualities of noble-hearted fatherhood, and all the qualities of gentle, tender motherhood. As a father, He can inspire courage and fortitude when we are in the troubled hours of life, and like a concerned mother, He can bring comfort and peace.

God says (in Isaiah 66:13), concerning the future of Israel, “As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you.” Our God is a tender God.

### **5. A Shepherd Who Seeketh**

In Ezekiel 34 we are given another illustration of the tenderness of God. The passage says, “As a shepherd seeketh out his flock . . . so will I seek out my sheep and will deliver them out of all places where they have been scattered in the cloudy and dark day . . . and I will bring them to their own land, and feed them upon the mountains of Israel” (Ezekiel 34:12-13).

Some of the latter chapters of the Book of Ezekiel tell how God will regather the Jews out of the countries into which they were scattered, and bring them back into their own land. Sad things are happening to the Jewish people today. One television program in the Middle East depicted hatred for the Jew by showing girls biting off the heads of live snakes, and a little boy killing a puppy and then drinking its blood—all in an attempt to show how they feel toward the despised Jew. But God is not through with Israel. In Ezekiel 34:16, God says, “I will bring again that which was driven away, and will bind up that which was broken, and will strengthen that which was sick,” and in verse 14 of the same chapter, He says, “I will feed them in a good pasture.” God is like a good shepherd who has a tender concern for his sheep.

The prophets portrayed the compassion of Jesus under the same figure. Isaiah 40:11 says, “He shall feed his flock like a shepherd.” Jesus himself used the symbolism when He said, “I am the good shepherd” (John 10:11). The Apostles in the New Testament represented Jesus in the same way. See Hebrews 13:20 and 1 Peter 5:4. Also, in Luke 15, the tenderness of Jesus is pictured as a shepherd (willing to give his life so that straying sheep might be found).

If any of us is drifting; if any of us has stumbled; be assured that our Lord Jesus will appropriately punish, but at the same time He is waiting to tenderly place us on His shoulder and bring us home to God—if we are meek enough to put ourselves into His care. God says to the people of Israel (in Ezekiel 34:12-16), “As a shepherd seeketh out his flock . . . among his sheep that are scattered; so will I seek out my sheep . . . and bind up that which was broken . . . (and) will feed them in a good pasture.” These words again picture for us something of the tenderness of God.

## 6. A Refiner Who Sitteth

In Malachi 3, God is said to be “like a refiner’s fire” (verse 2), and then in verse 3, we read: “He shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; and he shall purify the sons of Levi and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness.”

Refining and smelting (referred to in Isaiah 1:25) have to do with the purifying of metals. Smelting means “to purge away impurities by the process of separating metal from its ore, by the use of heat.” The person who did the smelting was called a “refiner.” The refiner used some kind of furnace to intensify the heat, and the metal was heated until it appeared in liquid form. Silver melts at a bit over 1,700°F. When heated to the melting point, impurities tend to float on top of the liquified metal, and they can be dipped off, or dissolved with an alkali—and then the pure metal shines with a new brightness.

The refiner (according to the passage in Malachi 3:3) “sits.” He must sit and keep his eye fixed on the heated metal, for if the crucible of silver gets too hot, then its quality becomes damaged. The refiner sits by the heated metal and watches carefully for long periods of time, carefully dipping off the impurities as they appear at the surface.

In the Bible, **God** is pictured as the purifier of human hearts. Sometimes He really turns on the heat!! God’s people are like tea-bags; they are not worth much unless they’ve been in hot water. But even though the Lord allows us to experience the furnace of trial and affliction, we can be sure that He is purifying us in wisdom and love. The Lord Jesus constantly stands by our side and carefully watches our progress. He knows when the silver is ready and how to dip off the impurities. And when the dross is removed, He can see His own image reflected in the new brilliance of our lives. Malachi says that the Lord will sit like a refiner of silver and will purge us like gold and silver that we may offer unto the Lord an offering of righteousness.

The tenderness of God is a beautiful truth. Even in the midst of trial, He sits with us and works out a good purpose. The hymn-writer says, “Does Jesus care when my heart is pained too deeply for mirth or song; as the burdens press and the cares distress—and the way grows weary and long? Does Jesus care when I’ve said ‘Goodbye’ to the dearest on earth to me; and my sad heart aches till it nearly breaks—is it aught to Him? Does He see?” The chorus says, “Oh yes He cares, I know He cares; His heart is touched with my grief; when the days are weary and the long nights dreary, I know my Savior cares.” And indeed He does!

## 7. A Hen That Gathereth

Jesus says, as recorded in Matthew 23:37, “O Jerusalem . . . how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not.” Here, the Lord Jesus compares His saving, persevering mercy to a hen covering her brood with her wings in times of danger.

Jesus knew that the Roman armies were about to totally destroy the city of Jerusalem, and thus He pleaded with the inhabitants to seek the shelter which He so willingly offered. Doubtless, Jesus often watched a mother hen calling her young beneath her sheltering wing, and He saw how the little chicks would rush for protection. But here were people who brazenly refused God's protection, and the tenderness of Jesus was stirred.

This message on divine tenderness would be incomplete if we failed to say that if the forgiveness of God's tender heart is spurned, and if one goes on in carelessness and loose living—then another side of God's nature is seen. Tough, hard, and unbending justice must operate upon the individual—if God's love is finally rejected. If a soul dies without Christ, then the righteous judgment of the Almighty will fall upon the guilty sinner. Therefore, may each Christian (as opportunity affords) urge sinners to be wise, and to respond to the tenderness of God, while the invitation to flee from the "wrath to come" is still being extended. And if you have never turned over your life to Jesus, remember that our God (in tenderness) calls for sinners to embrace the arms of Jesus and find refuge for the guilty soul.

-Harold S. Martin

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**BIBLE HELPS**

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