

“THE EXCELLENT VIRTUE OF JEALOUSY.” Exodus 34:1-17

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Is jealousy is virtue or is it a vice? That depends on how you use it.

Jealousy can be very fine quality.

It has an honored place in our most intimate relationships. Jealousy can be the noble impulse to safeguard something precious.

- But that’s not what we usually think of jealousy, is it?

William Shakespeare warned, *‘Beware of Jealousy! It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock the meat it feeds on.’* (Othello)

It’s a monster. There’s nothing pretty about it.

But that’s jealousy, the evil twin. Jealousy can be an ugly pimple on the nose or a delightful dimple on the chin.

- Jealousy is one of God’s attributes.

God told Moses he was a jealous God. Let us look at part of our text in Exodus 34:1-17.

⁵ *Then the LORD came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the LORD.*

⁶ *And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness,*

⁷ *maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation."*

⁸ *Moses bowed to the ground at once and worshiped.*

⁹ *"O Lord, if I have found favor in your eyes," he said, "then let the Lord go with us. Although this is a stiff-necked people, forgive our wickedness and our sin, and take us as your inheritance."*

¹⁰ *Then the LORD said: "I am making a covenant with you. Before all your people I will do wonders never before done in any nation in all the world. The people you live among will see how awesome is the work that I, the LORD, will do for you.*

¹¹ *Obey what I command you today. I will drive out before you the Amorites, Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites.*

¹² *Be careful not to make a treaty with those who live in the land where you are going, or they will be a snare among you.*

¹³ *Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones and cut down their Asherah poles.*

¹⁴ *Do not worship any other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.*

God said, call me ‘Jealous Lord,’ because that’s who I am, and don’t you ever forget it!”

- God explains to us why he is jealous.

God’s jealousy guards an exclusive relationship.

It’s the kind of jealousy you find in a healthy marriage, where the husband and wife steadfastly guard their exclusive intimacy.

It’s a jealousy that protects against attacks and unwelcome intrusions.

I am a jealous husband, and I’m quite proud of the fact. It’s the kind of jealousy that springs from love, not from distrust or suspicion.

God’s jealousy is his protective and possessive love for his people.

God demands a special, exclusive relationship with his people—a place that belongs to no one else and to nothing else.

God will settle for nothing less. God is perfectly jealous.

Earlier in this Book of Exodus we read about God establishing an exclusive relationship with Israel.

God had redeemed the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. He had made a covenant with them. They became his people.

Then in Exodus 24:7 I read, *‘He (Moses) took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, “We will do everything the Lord has said; we will obey.’* (Exodus 24:7) God’s people pledged to honor the covenant.

This was a bit like a couple saying “I do” in their wedding vows.

The Israelites said, “I do.”

- But they didn’t. Israel broke the covenant.

God called Moses to meet him on Mt. Sinai, and Moses was on the mountain with God for a long time.

So what did the people do?

They became impatient and turned away from God's covenant. *"When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, "Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him." (Exodus 32:1)*

So God disciplined his people for breaking the covenant. 3,000 people died.

Moses begged for God's mercy on Israel's behalf, and God renewed the covenant with his people.

⁸ *Moses bowed to the ground at once and worshiped.*

⁹ *"O Lord, if I have found favor in your eyes," he said, "then let the Lord go with us. Although this is a stiff-necked people, forgive our wickedness and our sin, and take us as your inheritance."*

¹⁰ *Then the LORD said: "I am making a covenant with you. Before all your people I will do wonders never before done in any nation in all the world. The people you live among **Word did not find any entries for your table of contents.** will see how awesome is the work that I, the LORD, will do for you.*

Once again God stressed the fact that he is a jealous God: *'Do not worship any other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.'* (v.14)

God has not mellowed and gotten over his jealousy with time.

He won't tolerate his people giving his exclusive place to anyone or anything else.

- God is not like us. We have lots of casual relationships. God doesn't have any casual relationships.

People are either completely alienated from God because of sin, or they belong to God in a close, intimate relationship.

There is no in-between casual relationship with God. Those are the only two options God has established.

- The biblical writers were often in awe of the intensity of God's love for mankind.

God has a wholehearted commitment to his people, and he won't settle for a half-hearted response from us.

- I've been speaking about God's people. Exactly who are God's people?

All who have come into a personal relationship with God through saving faith in Jesus Christ are the people of God.

God's people are in a covenant relationship with him.

By his atoning sacrifice on the cross Jesus Christ opened up the way for people from all nations to become the people of God.

God is just as zealous today in preserving the unique, exclusive relationship he has with his people who belong to him through faith in Jesus Christ. He is perfectly jealous.

- So what does God expect of us?

God expects his covenant with us, and our commitment to him to be more important than anything else.

Throughout the centuries Jewish people have regularly repeated an excerpt from the Torah. It's called the *shema*, from the first Hebrew word in the paragraph: *'Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.'* (Deuteronomy 6:4-5)

Because God is jealous, his people must be wholeheartedly committed to the covenant he made with them in Christ.

In Exodus 34:1-17 we find a couple of responsibilities that are essential to protecting our zeal for our jealous God. Both are very simple, but that doesn't make them easy.

I. KNOW GOD. Exodus 34:1-9

It's our responsibility to know God.

God has revealed to us who he is and what he has done. We don't have to guess.

The religions of the world have created gods out of human imaginations.

- Tragically, that's exactly what many people who claim to be Christians also do.

They come up with their own notion of what God is like. If it makes sense to them, then that's how God must be!

A woman once told me that she knew God wanted her to be happy; so it was okay to leave her husband because he made her unhappy. She tried to create a god of convenience. But that god existed only in her imagination.

The truth is that God has revealed his nature and his will in his holy word and in Jesus Christ who is God incarnate.

So there is no valid excuse for being ignorant of God.

¹ *The LORD said to Moses, "Chisel out two stone tablets like the first ones, and I will write on them the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke.*

² *Be ready in the morning, and then come up on Mount Sinai. Present yourself to me there on top of the mountain.*

³ *No one is to come with you or be seen anywhere on the mountain; not even the flocks and herds may graze in front of the mountain."*

⁴ *So Moses chiseled out two stone tablets like the first ones and went up Mount Sinai early in the morning, as the LORD had commanded him; and he carried the two stone tablets in his hands.*

⁵ *Then the LORD came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the LORD.*

⁶ *And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness,*

⁷ *maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation."*

God wanted his people to know him. He told Moses what to teach them.

- In our wildest imaginations we could never conceive what God is really like. He is beyond imagining. In the apostle Paul's magnificent doxology we read this: *'Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! "Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?" "Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?" For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory for ever! Amen.'* (Romans 11:33-36)

God had to reveal the truth about himself, otherwise we would never know.

God revealed himself as compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness and mercy, but also a just God who does not overlook unfaithfulness.

- How do you respond to a God like that? How did Moses respond?

⁸ *Moses bowed to the ground at once and worshiped.*

⁹ *"O Lord, if I have found favor in your eyes," he said, "then let the Lord go with us. Although this is a stiff-necked people, forgive our wickedness and our sin, and take us as your inheritance."*

Moses response was worship. He was overcome with wonder.

When you know God's Word, where he explains himself, then you know how to worship God

People who know how to worship God are people who love God's word.

If you don't know God, you worship a god of your own imagination.

- I'm convinced that you cannot truly worship God if don't don't delight in studying his word in which he reveals to us what he is like and what he has done for us.

People who delight in worshipping God for who he is have a voracious appetite for his word.

True worship may be a combination of being thrilled with an unspeakable sense of awe because of God's majesty and mercy, while being overwhelmed with a sense of humility in God's holy presence, just as Moses.

You don't just pull that out of the air.

Genuine worship springs from your knowledge of God—your contemplation of his greatness and his grace.

That's how Moses worshiped.

- But we forget so easily.

The people of Israel forgot their covenant with God and broke their commitment.

If we forget the truth about who God is, then God is pushed aside, while other interests—our "idols"—clamor for our attention and affection.

- God still says to his people today, *'I am compassionate and gracious, slow to anger; I am patient with your many distractions. But I won't tolerate being displaced by other affections.'*

God is a jealous God. He is perfectly jealous.

II. HONOR GOD. Exodus 34:10-17

How do we honor God? Many ways.

How do you honor your wife; how do you honor your husband? First and foremost, by keeping your most intimate relationship exclusive. You jealously guard against intrusions into the sacredness of your union.

A married man who flirts with other women, opens himself to emotional attachments outside his marriage. He dishonors his wife.

You honor your marriage partner by keeping a safe distance from temptations. You set boundaries that you refuse to cross, and you don't fantasize about crossing them.

- Honoring God is something like that.

Through the prophet Jeremiah the Lord said, *"But like a woman unfaithful to her husband, so you have been unfaithful to me, O house of Israel," declares the Lord.* (Jeremiah 3:20)

- God made a covenant with Israel and warned his people not to become intimate with the surrounding nations.

¹⁰ *Then the LORD said: "I am making a covenant with you. Before all your people I will do wonders never before done in any nation in all the world. The people you live among will see how awesome is the work that I, the LORD, will do for you.*

¹¹ *Obey what I command you today. I will drive out before you the Amorites, Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites.*

¹² *Be careful not to make a treaty with those who live in the land where you are going, or they will be a snare among you.*

¹³ *Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones and cut down their Asherah poles.*

¹⁴ *Do not worship any other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.*

¹⁵ *"Be careful not to make a treaty with those who live in the land; for when they prostitute themselves to their gods and sacrifice to them, they will invite you and you will eat their sacrifices.*

¹⁶ *And when you choose some of their daughters as wives for your sons and those daughters prostitute themselves to their gods, they will lead your sons to do the same.*

¹⁷ *"Do not make cast idols.*

Christians today are completely surrounded by people who don't know God. We're not protected from contamination in a spiritual cocoon.

We're enticed by a carnival of allurements. Some of them seem quite harmless; others are grotesquely evil. I have to guard against many things nudging my zeal for the Lord away from its central place.

- Do you know what happens when you let something else take the place that belongs to God in your life? Again, it's a bit like what happens when you neglect your marriage partner. You find yourself making excuses to yourself about why you don't spend time with God in prayer and studying his word.

Your worship of God becomes passionless, and your zeal for God evaporates.

God is jealous for his people's affection. He ordered Israel to take bold, decisive action to get rid of anything that might take his place.

¹³ *Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones and cut down their Asherah poles.* (The Ashera was an idol of a pagan deity).

God said *'Clean up your environment.'* Get rid of everything that dishonors God.

- But it's so natural just to blend into the ways of others around us.

Today Christians don't even blink an eye at things that used to make our eyes pop with shock.

Sometimes we chuckle at stuff that is detestable to God.

- God has repeatedly told his people not to be like the people who don't know God. That's the basic meaning of the word "holy." It means to be set apart for God.

You can be certain that there's something radically wrong if those who claim to be Christians are no different from people who are not Christians.

Christians are people of God. The Bible calls them "saints," meaning that they are holy, or set apart for God.

God wants us to understand that this is a huge issue with him. We dare not take it lightly. He is a jealous God.

This is what it means to belong to God.

How is your relationship with God? Has the passion drained out of it? Is it just an empty routine? Have you become indifferent about your spiritual health?

- Have you given that central, exclusive place in your life that belongs to God to something else?

Is the Holy Spirit of God convicting you to take a bold decisive step to break down some idols that you have set up in your life?

Maybe it is something patently impure, but it might be something that seems harmless, like your job, your toys. An idol is anything that takes God's prime place in your life and that keeps you from honoring God the way you should.

- When you worship God does it reflect the fact that you know God because you delight in his truth, or is it just a short-lived emotional high for you?

Will you humble yourself in prayer before God now and make things right? God is a jealous God.