

God is Jealous

Those of you who have been here at Faith for some time know that I grew up in Nebraska and have been a life-long Nebraska football fan. It is something that I have enjoyed a lot since I was a little boy.

In 1983 Nebraska had one of the most explosive teams of all time. The offense included Heisman trophy winner Mike Rozier, and Heisman candidates Turner Gill and Irving Fryer. Throughout that year they put up unbelievable numbers: 84 points against Minnesota, 63 vs. Syracuse, 69 vs. Colorado, 72 vs. Iowa St., 67 vs. Kansas and so on. Many considered it one of the best, if not the best, teams ever at Nebraska. It seemed certain they would win their first national championship in thirteen years. As a sophomore in college, I was pretty excited about that.

On January 2, 1984 Nebraska lost the national championship game by one point to Miami in the Orange Bowl. Like many Nebraskans, I was devastated by the loss. The next Sunday at church the pastor of the E-Free church up in Kearney that I attended said this about the game: "Well, the idol got knocked off the shelf didn't it?" At first his statement irritated me, but eventually I had to agree. Nebraska football at times has been a kind of idol in my life. It has occupied a place in my heart that it should never occupy.

Now, you might not care anything about football or sports and so it might seem silly that a game could occupy such a place in one's heart. But the truth of the matter is that there are many things that can slowly slide into a place in our hearts that God alone should occupy. It might be money, or success, or your job, or a hobby, or a spouse or our kids or any number of other good things. God alone is to dwell as the supreme thing in our hearts.

Today, as we continue our study on the character of God we are looking at the truth that God is jealous. Something about God calling Himself a jealous God sounds strange to our ears doesn't it? It feels right to say that God is a God of love, a God who is holy, unchanging, wise, just, all-powerful, but jealous? Isn't jealousy a bad thing?

Part of what makes us struggle here is that we tend to think of jealousy in only negative terms because in humans it is almost always a negative thing. But in God it is a worthy trait. Here's how J.I. Packer describes God's jealousy:

God's jealousy is not a compound of frustration, envy, and spite, as human jealousy so often is, but appears instead as a . . . praiseworthy zeal to preserve something supremely precious" (*Knowing God*, 153).

In the human realm jealousy is usually frustration, and envy and spite. But when it comes to God it refers to His good and right zeal to "preserve something supremely precious." And what is supremely precious is His honor. He is jealous for His honor. And he is jealous that He alone be the object of our worship and adoration. God is jealous.

This morning we are going to look at a couple of passages where God's reveals this aspect of His nature. I want to look first at Exodus 20. The setting is Mount Sinai. God has delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt and now they are now gathered at Mount Sinai where God is preparing them to live under His rule in the land that He has promised to them. In Exodus 20:1 we read this:

¹ Then God spoke all these words, saying, ² "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

God first declares His name and what He has done for Israel. He says, *I am the LORD your God.* "I am Yahweh." And He says that He is the One who has been active in Israel's history. He is the One who brought about their salvation when he *brought [them] out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.* And so the context of God's commands that God is preparing to give is the truth that He is the One True God who has delivered them from slavery. He then says this:

³ "You shall have no other gods before Me. ⁴ "You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. ⁵ "You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, ⁶ but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.

The land into which Israel was preparing to go was filled with people who were polytheistic. They worshiped many gods. But Israel, because of who God is and because of what He had done, was to worship Him exclusively. They were to have *no other gods before [Him]* (v. 3).

And, secondly, God commands them not to make *an idol, or any likeness* of something in the created realm. They were not to make them lest they *worship them or serve them.* And then God gives the reason why they must not worship and serve idols, God says, *"for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God."*

They must not worship any other god and they must not make any idol because to do so would be to worship that which is not the One True God. To do so would be to give honor and glory and esteem to other gods rather than to the One who had saved them. God says, "I'm zealous to preserve something supremely precious – My honor and My rightful place as the sole object of your worship."

Now, let me just comment on that last part of this passage. We read this same thing last week in the Exodus 34 passage. One thing to keep in mind as we consider what this means when it says that God visits the iniquity of the fathers on the children is what Moses made clear in Deuteronomy 24:16. He said there:

¹⁶ Fathers shall not be put to death for their sons, nor shall sons be put to death for their fathers; everyone shall be put to death for his own sin.

Most likely the meaning is that when fathers sin the children often follow suit in the same sin. They repeat the sins of their fathers. It seems that this is a warning against disobedience and the effects that it can have down through generations.

Now, I want to jump forward to Exodus 34. We looked at part of this passage last Sunday. In Exodus 34, God renews the covenant with Israel that He has made in chapter 20. God renews the covenant, because when Moses is up on the mountain meeting with God the children of Israel make the Golden Calf and they worship and serve it. They do the very thing that God has commanded them not to do. And so, Exodus 34 is an act of grace on God's part as He renews His covenant with Israel. In renewing the covenant, God says this in 34:12:

¹² "Watch yourself that you make no covenant with the inhabitants of the land into which you are going, or it will become a snare in your midst.

¹³ "But rather, you are to tear down their altars and smash their sacred pillars and cut down their Asherim

The land into which God is leading Israel is filled with nations that worship all kinds of idols and false gods. Israel is to have no part in any of that and so God commands them to smash and destroy all of the altars and pillars to the other gods. These things would be tempting to them and so they were to completely get rid of them. And then God says:

¹⁴ —for you shall not worship any other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God—

God not only says that He is a *jealous God*, but He also says that His name is *Jealous*. When God reveals His name, He is referring to His character, His nature. And so as God renews the covenant He reminds and even strengthens what He said in Exodus 20. He alone is to be the focus of their honor and worship. He is zealous for this.

And so when they enter the land they are to get rid of all the altars to other gods, *otherwise*, God says in verse 15:

¹⁵ otherwise you might make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land and they would play the harlot with their gods and sacrifice to their gods, and someone might invite you to eat of his sacrifice, ¹⁶ and you might take some of his daughters for your sons, and his daughters might play the harlot with their gods and cause your sons also to play the harlot with their gods. ¹⁷ "You shall make for yourself no molten gods.

The language that God uses here to describe what might happen if they don't destroy these altars to false gods gives us some insight into what it means that God is a jealous

God. God is using the language of marriage here. God chose Israel to be his people. With Israel alone, He entered into this covenant. He has promised that he would be faithful to them and He expects that they will be faithful to Him in return. He has entered into an exclusive relationship with the nation just like a husband and a wife in the marriage relationship. And God is concerned that these undestroyed idols will lead them away into harlotry – like a wife who gives herself to one to whom she is not married.

If a husband sees another seeking to woo his wife's heart away, a response of jealousy is good and right. It would be expected that a husband who truly loves his wife and who wants to protect the exclusive nature of their relationship would respond with jealousy in such a situation. God is a jealous God in this way. He is zealous to preserve something supremely precious – His honor and His rightful place as the sole object of our worship. And so they must not turn away from their exclusive relationship with God and *play the harlot with their gods*.

One of the main themes of the Old Testament is Israel's repeated failure to make God the sole object of their worship. They repeatedly were unfaithful. They were repeatedly drawn away to worship other gods. And so God, jealous for His honor, over and over again sent the prophets to call the nation back and He disciplined the nation in many ways to try to get them to worship Him alone, but they persisted in their unfaithfulness. And so ultimately, God allowed them to be disciplined to the extent that they were carried off into captivity. It was a severe discipline. But when God restored them from their captivity, they had learned their lesson. Though they had other problems, Israel never again struggled in the same way with idolatry.

God is a jealous God. He is zealous for His honor. He is zealous that He be the sole object of His people's worship whether that is Old Testament Israel or whether that is you and me today.

When we come to the New Testament, the apostle Paul uses this language of jealousy to describe what he passionately longs for for the Corinthians in their relationship with Christ. Here's what he says in 2 Cor. 11:2-3:

² For I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy; for I betrothed you to one husband, so that to Christ I might present you as a pure virgin. ³ But I am afraid that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds will be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ.

Paul's jealousy here mirrors God's jealousy for Israel in the passages that we looked at – it is an example of *godly jealousy*. He is jealous for the Corinthians that they would have undivided loyalty to Christ. He says *I betrothed you to one husband*. And to the one husband he wants to present them *as a pure virgin* – a church not given to any others, but to Christ alone. It is the same language of an exclusive marriage relationship requiring absolute fidelity. That is the nature of our relationship to God. Christ alone is to be the object of our devotion.

God is a jealous God. It is His nature to always zealously seek His honor and to be the only object of our worship. As we think about this truth about God it certainly begs the question: Are there any idols in your life? Is there anything that is occupying the place in your heart where only God should dwell? Is there anything that is drawing you away from your pure devotion to Christ?

I'm going to list some things and as I do, I would love for you to sort of whisper in your heart, "Holy Spirit, show me if any of these things have become an idol in my life." Most of the time I think that we don't recognize when some of these things have subtly slid into this place in our hearts. We need God to show us. And so ask Him.

Is your spouse in that place or your children? Obviously, family is vitally important, but is there any way where you are putting your wife or your husband or your children before God? Or if you are not married, has the desire for a relationship taken that place? Is the person you are dating in that place?

What about your work and career? What about your pursuit of money and possessions? Have these things become your god? Do you value them more highly than your relationship with Christ?

What about pleasure and gratification? Has the pursuit of pleasure become an idol in your life? Do you give it more attention than God? For some of you, you have placed pleasure and gratification at the center of your heart and that thing has now become an addiction in your life. You know that your life revolves around that pleasure or gratification.

Now, you might be surprised that I raise this issue, but what about the church? Is there any way that the church and your service in the church has become more important to you than God Himself? Has your desire to make a difference in this world has become more important than God? Remember what Jesus said to the church in Ephesus in Revelation 2 in John's vision? Though He praised the church for their deeds and toil and perseverance (Rev. 2:2), he said to them in Revelation 2:4:

But I have this I against you, that you have left your first love.

Has serving God become an idol in your life?

Do you sense that any of these things or anything else is occupying a place in your heart that belongs to God? If so, just recognizing that is a good first step. But we would do well to follow the admonition that Jesus gives the church in Ephesus. He urges them to repent (Rev. 2:5). Confess it and ask God to help you turn from that idol. Because God wants to be the unrivaled object of your affection and worship, that is a prayer that He will indeed answer.

If you refuse to turn from that idol, the example of Israel should be a strong warning in your life. God in His jealousy will use severe means to discipline us that we might wor-

ship Him alone. Someone has said that we will seek God out of priority or pain. If you don't chose to place God as the object of your worship and affection, because He loves you so much and because He is jealous to occupy that rightful place in your heart, He will bring pain into your life just like He did the nation of Israel. It took Israel the pain of losing everything before they finally turned from idolatry.

Now, as we think about some of the other attributes of God that we've looked at this summer – He is loving, holy, all-powerful, perfectly wise, unchanging, just and good – why wouldn't we want him as the object of our worship and devotion? Life is best and life works best when we worship and adore God above all else.

Amen.