

WHAT’S UP WITH A JEALOUS GOD?

A Discussion by Dr. Pat Zukeran

For most of us, jealousy is an ugly word. It conjures up notions of selfishness, suspicion, and distrust, and insecurity. It is possessive, demanding, and overbearing and *that* is repulsive. It stifles freedom. It degrades and demeans. It breeds tension and discord. It destroys friendships and marriages. We view jealousy as a horrible trait and we hate it. So, when God says, “I’m a jealous God!” we are surprised and immediately question, “How can a God who is holy, just, loving, gracious, merciful, and longsuffering possibly be jealous? Isn’t it a contradiction in His character?” One of the most misunderstood doctrines is the jealousy of God.

In his book, [The God Delusion](#), atheist professor Richard Dawkins writes, “The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.” Notice the first trait that he attacks is the jealousy of God. What are we to make of God saying He is a jealous God? Is there ever a time jealousy is just and appropriate? We need to explore a side of jealousy that may have escaped us.

There are times jealousy can be just and when God refers to Himself as a jealous God it is often in the context of idolatry. One of the first times God’s jealousy appears is in the first commandment of the Ten Commandments. Exodus 20 records the Ten Commandments written by the finger of God and the first commandment is this. This is the command: “You shall not make for yourself a carved image or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above or that is in the earth beneath or that is in the water underneath.” That is the command. Now, the two words for “idol” there, the first one is *pesel*. Here it means “idol”. The second word *temunah* in Hebrew means “likeness”. So, the two words are used to state, “you shall not make any sort of idol to worship”. In other words, nothing from anywhere can be copied and used as an object of worship. The reason is idolatry is a dangerous thing. It is dangerous because it has the ability to corrupt and ruin civilizations for generations.

Idolatry was not simply just worshipping a statue. It involved an entire religious system, a way of thinking and a lifestyle all of which was dangerous, destructive, and contrary to God’s commands. Cultures that practice idolatry assume that the presence of a god or a goddess inhabits the idol and that the idol partakes of the very essence of divinity. When an idol was carved and rituals were performed, it was believed that the spirit of the god would actually enter into that idol. People believed that offerings they bring before an idol of a god and the prayers they said in the idol’s presence were fully heard by the god whom that idol represented. That was back then and that is still believed today in cultures where idolatry is prevalent. It is like, when a person today speaks into a cell phone or a television camera, their words and actions are being transmitted from their location. That’s what idol worshipers believed when they are praying and worshipping in front of their idol.

But also, the idol is believed to give the worshiper some control over the gods. The gods are believed to have powers but they cannot feed themselves. They are dependent on humans to feed them, so by feeding the god, the god then is obligated to grant the wish of the worshiper.

But not only that, idol worship in the Middle East involved abominable practices. Let me just go through a few here. One was temple prostitution. The worship of the Canaanite gods included temple prostitution with temple prostitutes. These included men, women, boys, and girls. Talk about sex trafficking here. This practice was destructive to families and individuals. Many believed that having sex with a temple prostitute was equal to having sex with a god or goddess. The abomination or the perversion of this can be seen throughout the Old Testament, in books like Amos 2:7-8. Amos rebuked the nation of Israel and noted that a father and a son would visit the same temple prostitute. So, temple prostitution was one of the abhorrent practices connected with idolatry.

There’s also child sacrifice. The worship of the god of Molech, the god of the underworld involved child sacrifice where mothers and fathers would place their little children on the altar of Molech and sacrifice their children to him. Kleitarchos, an Old Testament historian reported what would occur during these child sacrifices. Molech would have his hands clasped together out forward to receive the child. The hands of bronze would be heated up until they are burning red and then the child would be placed upon the hands of Molech. Kleitarchos writes, “As the flame burning the child surrounded the body, the limbs would shrivel up, the mouth of Molech would appear to grin as if laughing until it would shrunk enough to slip into the burning cauldron.”

They would place the child on the burning hands of Molech as the child screamed for their mom and dad, and eventually died and would curl up. The child would roll down the arms of Molech and into the burning cauldron, which was usually in the area of his stomach and the child would roll into there. That’s the kind of abominable practices that was going on and God did not want his people, did not want that kind of practice to infiltrate the Israeli culture or civilization. That’s why He ordered them just to wipe out those civilizations practicing those things that were beyond redemption.

However, Israel failed to do that and the worship of Molech actually entered in to the land of Israel. Leviticus 18:21 says, “You shall not give any of your children to offer them to Molech and so profane the name of the Lord your God. I am the LORD.” Child sacrifice was a regular part of the worship of Molech and it entered into the land of Israel to even where the king of Israel was offering his children to Molech. 1 Kings 11:7 says, “Then Solomon built a high place for Chemosh, the abomination of Moab and for Molech, the abomination of the Ammonites on the mountain east of Jerusalem.” Because it was not wiped out from the land of Israel that practice ended up coming in and infiltrating and corrupting the nation of Israel.

Another abominable practice associated with idolatry was necromancy that is communicating with the spirits of the dead. That also infiltrated and corrupted the nation of Israel. 2 Kings 17:17 says, “They sacrificed their sons and daughters in the fire.” That means they worshiped Molech. They practiced divination and sought omens and sold themselves to do evil in the eyes of the Lord arousing His anger. God forbids necromancy, communicating with the dead because according to the Bible, Luke 16, you cannot communicate with the dead, the spirits of the loved ones who have either gone to be with the Lord or are eternally separated from Him in hell. You cannot communicate with them. Trying to communicate with these spirits, if indeed you do communicate with some kind of spirit, that is a demonic spirit masquerading as your deceased loved one. That’s why necromancy is forbidden.

Also, divination, the conjuring and consulting of spirits - that is also forbidden. And that, according to 2 Kings 17, is what happened in the nation of Israel. It corrupted that civilization. Divination: when you are consulting other spirits you are consulting demonic forces, the forces of darkness. That’s why it is such a dangerous practice and it is forbidden by God.

With such dangerous practices and addictions, a loving God commands His people to avoid idolatry at all costs. Don’t even go near it. It’s like pornography, gambling, or drugs. These are very dangerous and destructive addictions.

When it comes to pornography, it is estimated that over 50% of people in the United States are addicted to pornography. Studies have shown that exposure to pornography, especially violent pornography, can lead to a host of dangerous behaviors including anti-social behavior, aggression towards women, mistreatment of women, insensitivity to pain, rape, and more willingness to accept myths about rape. A 1995 meta-analysis of many studies found that violent pornography might reinforce aggressive behavior and negative attitude towards women. Studies have demonstrated that pornography can diminish a husband or spouse’s sexual happiness. In both parties, husband and wife, it also increases discontent with one’s spouse. Something like pornography has been tremendously damaging. It’s destructive to marriages. So, why even go near it? Stay away from it. Don’t let it infiltrate and get a foothold in your life or the life of your family.

Gambling is another one. It’s a powerful greed. It feeds greed. That’s why it’s such a powerful addiction and it has ruined families and cultures all over the world. Why even go near it? Root it out of your life.

Drug addiction—need I say anything about that? Why go near it? Why mess around, why even play with it? Keep it away from your life. If you see any signs of it infiltrating into your household, deal with it and get rid of it immediately. Just as those are dangerous addictions, God did not want idolatry getting a foothold in any family or in the nation of Israel.

Idolatry is not just the worship of an idol. Biblically speaking, anything that takes priority over God in your life is idolatry. If it’s your job, if it’s your family, if it’s money, if it’s material things, whatever takes the throne of your life and takes priority over God, *that* is idolatry. According to Hort and Westcott (Westcott and Hort), the New Testament scholars, an idol is “anything which occupies the place due only to God.” So, if anything takes priority over God in your life, *that* is idolatry and you need to root out idolatry from your life.

So, take time to reflect and see if there’s anything that is taking priority over your life over God. Or, pray and ask God to reveal it to you. Ask Him, “Is there anything in my life that is taking priority over You?” If so, you’ve committed the sin of idolatry. Repent and place God back on the throne of your life as first priority. Matthew 6:33 says, “Seek ye first the kingdom of God and all these things shall be added unto you.” Put God first in your life and the things of life fall rightly into place.

The command was to avoid idolatry at all cost. He states in the next verse: “You shall not bow down to them or serve them for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God.” The root idea in the Old Testament for the word jealous, *qana*, it means literally “to become intensely red”. It seems to refer to the changing color of the face or the rising heat of the emotions which are associated with intense zeal or fervor over something that is very valuable and dear to us. So, in a favorable sense, it denotes consuming zeal focused on one that is loved

and treasured by the person. In fact, both the Old and New Testament words for jealousy are also translated zeal. Being jealous and being zealous are essentially the same thing in the Bible when used of God.

Jealousy can be right sometimes and wrong at other times. Wrong jealousy for us is about being jealous or envious for what does not belong to us. But God cannot ever be jealous in the wrong way. He cannot be jealous of what does not belong to Him, since He owns everything in all of creation. Psalm 24:1 declares, “The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it, the world and all who live in it.” Therefore, it is neither wrong nor inconsistent for God to be jealous for our devotion, for we belong to Him.

Also, note that not all jealousy is wrong for human beings. Godly jealousy is indeed just and right. For example, Paul’s jealousy for the church was commendable. He wrote to the Corinthians, “I’m jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to Him.” Likewise, there’s nothing wrong with a husband having appropriate jealousy over his wife since she belongs to him. So, if he finds someone that is seducing her into a dangerous relationship, there is nothing wrong with him wanting to be zealous in protecting her from harm. She belongs to him and is under his care. Just as a father holds dear his children and is zealous—he is jealous—to protect them from any harmful force that may come upon them, God is zealous and jealous meaning He is zealous and eager about protecting what is very dear and precious to Him.

There are several things God is zealous in protecting. God is protective of His Name. God zealously protects the honor and integrity of His character. If someone publicly maligns your name, or the name of your company, or your family members, you would immediately respond by protecting your integrity and your reputation. You wouldn’t want anyone maligning your character or the members of your family. In the same way, God is protective of His name, of His honor, and the integrity of His character.

God is protective of Israel - God’s people He zealously loves and protects.

God is protective also of His bride, His church. When God says He is a jealous God, He is eager to protect what He dearly loves and that includes you, men and women and children of God. He is jealous because He holds you very dear and valuable to Himself.

I remember watching the movie *Taken* starring Liam Neeson. In this movie, his daughter is kidnapped in Paris and he has about 48 hours to find her or she will be lost in the sex trafficking business forever. Liam Neeson being a former CIA agent has very special skills. So, he flies to Paris to hunt down the kidnapers and rescue his daughter. He discovers one of the kidnapers and he finds him at the airport. He hunts him down but in a chase that person is killed. Liam Neeson contacts one of his old contacts in the Paris Police Department. I believe he was a captain. As they are having a conversation on the street, the captain kind of nonchalantly just says to Liam Neeson, “We are doing everything we can to find her but, in the meantime...” He looks at Liam Neeson kind of nonchalantly and says, “... don’t go shooting up all of Paris while you’re looking for your daughter.” Liam Neeson responds and says, “I will burn down all of Paris if I have to to get my daughter back!”

In that statement, we kind of side with Liam Neeson. That zeal, that jealousy to get his daughter back, to rescue her from harm because he dearly loves her. We kind of side with Liam Neeson on that because he dearly

loves his daughter and he knows he only has a short time to get her back and he will do whatever it takes to get her back and rescue her from danger.

That kind of represents when God says, “I’m a jealous God”, the zeal, the passion He has for what He dearly loves, you and me, wanting to protect us and rescue us from forces that are dangerous and destructive to us. So, when God says, He’s a jealous God, He’s eager to protect what He dearly loves and that includes you. He’s eager and passionate for your welfare. So, God is jealous and zealous for us.

My question for you is this: “Are we in turn jealous for God?” When the laws of God are violated, when God’s Name is profaned, when His reputation, when His Word is defamed, are we jealous for God? Is there a passion in us to defend the integrity and reputation of our God who is zealous and jealous for us? Are we jealous for His Name? Imagine if the church of Jesus Christ had that kind of passion and zeal for their God as He has for us. Imagine the kind of impact the church would have on the world today. When the laws of God are violated, when God’s covenant of marriage is violated and redefined, when God’s laws are regularly broken, unjust laws are created, God’s creation, His people are being mistreated, taken advantage of and destroyed, do we have that kind of zeal for God’s Name?

That is the cause of why God forbids idolatry - because He is a jealous God, zealous to protect His people from harm.

The consequence is this. He says, “visiting the iniquity of the fathers on their children to the third and fourth generation to those who hate me.” This is another misunderstood verse. God does not punish an innocent generation for the sins of a predecessor generation. Deuteronomy 24:16 says, “Fathers shall not be put to death for their children nor children put to death for their fathers; each is to die for his own sin.” This often repeated theme speaks of God’s determination to punish successive generations for committing *the same* sins committed by their parents. God will indeed punish generation after generation if they keep doing the same sorts of sins that the prior generation committed. If the children continue to do the sins their parents did, they will receive the same punishment as their parents. However, if the children, if that generation repents and turn to God He will not continue to punish them instead His blessings will be upon them.

This whole thing about generational curses is only true if the next generation continues in the same sins of the previous generation. If there’s repentance and turning to God, that curse is broken and instead the blessings of God come upon that generation that repents and turns to God.

For example, when one generation destroys the environment then the next generations suffer the consequences of that. For example, like strip miners. When they completely dig out an entire mountainside looking for minerals, if after digging out that mountainside they just simply leave it as it is, then it remains like a desert plain for generations. However, if they push back the top soil they dug out, then within 10-15 years you have a forest growing once again. But if not then it remains a desert plain for generations. Illegal foresting is another example. When you clear a mountain of its trees and don’t replace it with saplings, it remains a desert plain for generations.

You can see how the sins of one generation the next generation must suffer its consequences. It’s the same thing with something like financial debt. When someone has tremendous financial debt, if parents have

tremendous financial debt when they die that debt is passed on to their children who inherit that debt. We see the welfare cycle in the United States, when one family is on welfare and does not take appropriate actions to get out of the welfare system, often the succeeding generation if they do not change also follows in their footsteps and remains in the welfare system and we have generations in the welfare system. However, if the sons and daughters repent and turn to God then the blessings of God come upon them.

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Patrick Zukeran served on the staff of Probe Ministries for 22 years, having received graduate degrees from Dallas Theological Seminary (Th.M) and Southern Evangelical Seminary (D.Min). He presently serves on the faculty of the Bible Institute of Hawaii (www.biblehawaii.org) and is the Director of the Pacific Apologetics Center (www.pacificapologetics.org) based in Hawaii. He serves on the faculty of several Christian colleges around the world. He has a national and international speaking and teaching ministry, and also hosts a national and international radio show “Evidence and Answers” (www.evidenceandanswers.org). Pat has authored several books including *The Apologetics of Jesus*, co-authored with Norman Geisler, *Unless I See*, and served as editor of *God, Eternity, and Spirituality*.

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