

Behind the Waterfall – Love and Jealousy

Deuteronomy 4:15-24 / John 8:1-12

Today I want to talk about a really difficult topic. No – it's not the genocide we come across in Joshua, nor the stoning of women caught in adultery – though it is related to both of these things. The topic I want to open up is the jealousy of God. The jealousy of God sounds problematic and it is problematic. It's a powerful emotion that God feels and needs to do something with because it can be just as toxic, destructive, dangerous and threatening for God as it is for humans. In this sermon I want to ask:

How is God's jealousy expressed in the Old Testament?

What does it mean that God is jealous?

How is God's jealousy played out?

Jealousy is not the same as envy. Envy wants what another has; jealousy believes that what he loves has been stolen. God has a strongly felt desire not to lose what he considers so precious. Put in the context of the Old Testament, God has initiated a special relationship with his people – he actually calls them “my treasured possession” - and he considers this relationship so precious that he's desperate not to lose it. Put in the context of us, here, now, it means that God considers his relationship with *you* so precious that he'll go to any lengths to enable it to stay alive.

How is God's jealousy expressed in the Old Testament?

You may have heard of the woman who sold her husband's Porsche for £100 on ebay. He'd just run off with someone else saying, “Keep the house but sell the Porsche and send me the cash.” Jealousy's provoked by the perceived or real actions of another.

A Method of Control?

Nearly always, when God describes himself as jealous, it's in the context of his people being tempted to follow other gods or worship idols. He's warning them of the dangers they face and also warning them to beware of his reaction: “**For the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God**” (Deuteronomy 4:24) Such warnings are troubling. If your partner said that to you, you'd be right to worry. It sounds very much like paranoid control through the establishment of fear. So is God a control freak?

A Cause for Genocide?

Reading on, there are more troubling signs. As Joshua enters the promised land, God requires the complete annihilation of those living there, along with all their livestock and belongings. The reason given is that only complete destruction will prevent God's people from being led astray. But again, there's something extreme about this. Inevitably, the people don't fully comply, and God allows them not only to be defeated badly in their next battle, but also sanctions the stoning of those responsible – Achan and his family. It's extremely difficult to justify this seemingly abhorrent action by a supposedly loving God. This jealousy may be godly, but it certainly doesn't seem good.

An Outlet for Misogyny?

Another book in which the jealousy of God features powerfully is the much later prophecy of Ezekiel. Passages such as Chapter 16 are truly shameful in the way the imagery degrades women. The Lord is speaking to Israel who has brought idols into the temple and is worshipping other gods. The Lord describes her as an unfaithful wife, calling her a harlot, a tart. He says he'll thrust her down on the ground, lift her skirts and expose her nakedness, shaming her publicly. Then he'll let her lovers rape her one by one. The language is violent; it feels misogynistic. Can this really be our God talking?

Well, the Bible was written in the language and culture of its time. Our job is try and separate that cultural influence and so release the message for today. It's like separating an egg – but usually a great deal harder. The jealousy behind the destruction in Joshua was expressed in the culture of a holy war. None of us here would seek to justify it; we can't understand it; but the message is clear: God is desperate not to lose his people. The jealousy in Ezekiel was expressed in the culture of a patriarchal society and misogynistic priesthood. Ezekiel was himself a priest and son of a priest. Few of us would condone the violence of the language, but again the message is clear: God feels strongly about losing his people to other gods.

Looking through the Lens of Christ.

There are, of course, many deeply moving, positive manifestations of God's jealous love in the Old Testament – especially in the book of Hosea, for example. Yet the image of a jealous God is still troubling. What sort of a God is this who keeps us fearful? Do we really want to be living with a jealous husband who might erupt at any moment, or someone who'd expose us publicly and shame us in front of everyone? This God seems so different to Jesus, and actually that's a crucial point, because as Christians we interpret the Old Testament scriptures *through the lens of Christ*.

Contrast, therefore, Jesus' attitude towards women, his saving of the woman caught in

adultery and his public shaming of the men and we realise that Ezekiel's attitude was not the defining one. Here in John 8 God's jealousy to save the people he loves reaches out to rescue the woman and shame the men. Or contrast Jesus' "eating with tax collectors and sinners" or his teaching that non-Jewish food was good to eat, and we realise that the commands of annihilation in Joshua are also not defining. Nor should the accounts of the conquest of the promised land in Joshua be defining for the policies of the modern state of Israel, it's illegal seizure of land and oppressive actions against Muslim and Christian Palestinians. These considerations don't remove the problems altogether, but they go some way towards helping us separate the culture and context of the time from the basic message.

What does it mean that God is jealous?

Here is the message: God loves, God prizes, and God feels. That's what it means for God to be described as jealous.

God Loves

First of all, the message is that God loves. Jealousy isn't always about control and manipulation. It can also be about love. St Augustine said, "*He that is not jealous is not in love.*" So firstly, the message is that *God loves*.

Love involves protection – the protection of a person, and the protection of your relationship with that person; and jealousy can be a desire to guard what we protect: the sanctity of a precious relationship or the safety of those we care for. And God is the same. He really doesn't want to lose his relationship with us, and he really doesn't want us to waste our lives infatuated by false values and fake hopes. This is the jealousy of a loving God.

Love also involves formation. We want to see our loved ones grow – especially obvious in a parent's love for a child, but in all loving relationships you want to see the other person grow. Love therefore invests in the other – not necessarily in a controlling way - and we jealously guard that investment. The loving parent whose child is led astray has their jealousy aroused, and in the same way God describes his jealousy being aroused when those who are growing through their relationship with him and led astray by the lure of idols. Once again, it's the jealousy of a loving God. The jealousy of God speaks of the love of God: God loves.

God Prizes

Secondly, the message is that God prizes.

Love always contains an element of possession. The statement in the marriage service that we “belong to one another” is not only a statement of mutual self-giving, but also therefore of mutual possession. When one partner in a marriage is attracted to a third person, the other partner has a choice: am I simply going to let this go or am I going to do something, say something, fight to hold on to the good thing I have? I think it's a little strange, certainly sad, and sometimes a symptom of depression when there's no fight. You fight for what you value.

A girl chats up a nice-looking guy by the bar. He says, “Are you here alone?” She says, “No, I can't find my husband but he always turns up when he sees me talking to another man.” We guard what we consider precious. What would you rescue from a burning house? A friend of mine rescued his baby boy. There was no way out, he jumped through the window broke his back, but they both survived. When we're in danger of losing what we consider precious we feel and act with urgency. God's jealousy shows how much he prizes us.

God loves; God prizes;

God Feels

Thirdly, the message is that God feels.

Jealousy's a powerful emotion, and the God we have revealed here therefore is an emotional, feeling God. It's difficult to imagine God as emotional because we only have our own confused emotions as a reference point, and our experience of emotions out of control.

God feels powerfully, but unlike us, he's never *ruled* by his emotions. He exists in a perfect balance of wisdom, justice, rationality, feeling, love, playfulness, creativity. We're right to be in awe of God's feelings because they're divinely powerful. Yet we don't need to *fear* God's feelings because unlike for us humans, they never unbalance him.

How does this jealousy of God play itself out?

If God is powerfully jealous yet not ruled by jealousy, where does the jealousy go? What happens to it? Let me offer two partial answers: Firstly, God's jealousy is constrained by his gift of freedom; secondly, God's jealousy is unleashed in self-sacrifice.

Jealousy Constrained by Freedom

It's in the Old Testament where God's jealousy is most frightening for us, but even here he doesn't actually use it to control or manipulate the people. The constant message of the Old Testament, indeed especially in those books which most speak of God's jealousy, is the message

of choice. **“Choose this day whom you will serve.” “Choose which way you will walk.”** God expresses his jealousy but he also allows his people to make their own choices and go their own way. And the same is true for us. God feels for you, prizes you, loves you, but he also gives you freedom. Ultimately he doesn't control us or use the fear of his jealous anger to keep us in check. God's jealousy is constrained by his own gift of freedom.

Jealousy Unleashed in Self-Sacrifice

Secondly, however, God's jealousy is unleashed in self-sacrifice. Jesus said, **“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, Jesus Christ, so that all who believe in him may not perish but have eternal life.”** (John 3:16) The Old Testament speaks primarily of God's relationship with his people, Israel. But Jesus shows how precious everyone is to him. He loves, prizes, and feels for everyone. He desires that no person should be lost and burns with a passion to draw all people to himself.

This is the jealousy of God – that he wants no person he's made to be out of relationship with him. Because of God's passionate jealousy to reconcile us to himself, Jesus offered himself on the cross for our sins – sins that make a barrier between us and God, sins that stand between us and God, Jesus has paid the price for in his death. God considers his relationship with *you* so precious that he'll go to any lengths to enable it to stay alive. So his jealousy to bring, to have, and to keep you close to himself is unleashed not on you, but on himself, in Jesus' death on the cross.

Reflect

Let me draw this to a close. Do you know how much God loves you? Look at the cross. Do you know how much God prizes you? Look at the cross. Do you know how much God feels for you and passionately wants you to be in a good relationship with him? Look at the cross. The cross has said it all. It's on the cross that we see God's jealousy for us most fully displayed – not unleashed upon us, but taken upon himself.

Perhaps you battle with jealousy – that strong and often confusing feeling we find it so hard to control. Bring your battles to Jesus because God knows the depths of jealous more than any of us, yet his jealousy is refined through the sieve of wisdom, love, righteousness and justice – and above, chastened through self-offering: The cross has said it all.

Perhaps you have friends who are far from God. What does God think about them? When you look at the cross and the fact that Christ died for everyone – the whole world – we're left in no doubt of his jealous love and his passion to bring all people to himself. Bring your friends who are far from God, to the cross, and be renewed in the passion that Christ has for them. The cross has

said it all

God made each of us here today. He wants us to know him. He wants us to be close to him. He wants us to be renewed by him. That's what his jealousy is about. Do you know how much God loves you? Reach out and receive that love. Do you know how much God wants to heal you? Reach out and take hold of his strength. Do you know how much God wants your friends to be saved? Bring them before the jealous passion of his cross.