
Redeeming Jealousy

The Glory of God's Exclusive Love

Erik Thoennes*

Hear the word *jealous*, and images of an insecure, abusive husband may come to mind. Indeed, sinful human jealousy has been the cause of countless difficulties and heartache in human relationships. For many today, the word *jealousy* is always a bad one.

It can be perplexing for Christians, then, when they come across a passage like Exodus 34:14: "You shall worship no other god, for the LORD, *whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.*" How could a perfect, loving, patient God call himself jealous? Is God insecure? Do passages like this simply represent a primitive, Old Testament idea of God that is thankfully done away with by the time we get to the New Testament? Maybe this is just a human way of talking about God that should not be taken seriously, or perhaps *jealous* is a bad translation of a Hebrew word that could allow for a less troublesome English word?

Despite confusion and aversion to this attribute of God, we must not reject or neglect this important aspect of God's character. The jealousy of God is an attribute that pervades the pages of Scripture and is an essential part of God's covenant love. To understand why God would call himself jealous, and even intensify this description by turning it into one of his divine names, we need to see Exodus 34:14 in its biblical context. This is also true for the hundreds of other times God declares or displays his jealousy in the Bible.

JEALOUSY AND ENVY

While all human words are frail and limited in describing God, we need to allow God's verbal revelation to hold the power and meaning he intends for it to have.

* Erik Thoennes is professor and chair of theology at Talbot School of Theology/Biola University, pastor at Grace Evangelical Free Church in La Mirada, California, and author of *Godly Jealousy: A Theology of Intolerant Love*.

Jealous is actually a very good English word to translate the Hebrew word *kana* in Exodus 34. *Kana* (as well as the Greek equivalent *zelos*) could be translated as *zeal* or *envy* in other places in the Bible. Zeal is a general strong feeling to see something come about. Envy is a desire to gain possession of something that does not belong to you, and it is always sinful. Jealousy is a strong desire to maintain relational faithfulness that you believe does belong to you. Jealousy can be sinful if it is unwarranted or expressed in wrong ways, but it can also be an entirely appropriate and righteous emotion. We don't usually make any distinction between envy and jealousy, which contributes to the public-relations problem jealousy has.

God's jealousy is his righteous and loving demand of exclusive faithfulness from his covenant people. Because God rightly loves his own glory, and graciously loves us, he demands that we worship and serve him above all. In human history, God is most glorified by the undivided devotion of his redeemed people, and his ultimate jealousy for his glory demands this devotion. If he does not care when we love idols more than him, he would allow himself to be dishonored and let us settle for so much less than he intends us to have from life. God's jealous love demands the best of us and our relationships.

In Exodus 34, God is giving Moses the central demands of relating to him as his covenant people—a covenant he compares repeatedly to a marriage (Isa. 54:5; Jer. 2:2–3; Hos. 2:2). God is the husband of his people, and we are his bride. This metaphor only intensifies when we get to the New Testament (Matt. 9:15; Eph. 5:22–33; Rev. 19:6–9). To worship any God but the true God is spiritual adultery, and any husband who does not care that his wife committed adultery most certainly does not love her. Right at the heart of the laws of the covenant, God wants his people to know that this covenant relationship is permanent and exclusive. He wants them to realize that he is a personal God establishing a personal relationship with his people, and that his people should relate to him as he is, not as a more user-friendly god of their own making.

GOD'S JEALOUSY FOR HIS OWN GLORY

Throughout the Bible, God is rightfully jealous when he is dishonored, as we can see in the reason God gives for the second commandment:

You shall have no other gods before me. 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 under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, *for I the LORD your God am a jealous God*, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me. (Ex. 20:3–5)

God demands the fidelity of his people because he loves them, but ultimately because he is most glorified when they ascribe to him the honor that belongs to him alone. God achieves this goal of making himself known so that people will acknowledge, fear, worship, and obey him as the one and only Lord. Every key stage of salvation history points to this supreme aim. God's covenant love and compassion are no less operational than his jealousy; he is jealous for the devotion of his people because he has the loving heart of a father, but ultimately because he desires to protect the honor of his name.¹

God has a unique right to seek his own glory, a right none of us should seek to take for ourselves. Only God deserves absolute honor, worship, and glory, and he reacts with jealousy and anger when those he has created do not ascribe it to him, or when they desire it for themselves. God is righteous and therefore values above all else what is of ultimate value. He loves most what is most worthy of being loved, which is his own character, being, and perfections. Therefore, God's jealousy for his glory does not conflict with his love. Indeed, his perfect justice and love necessitate his own self-exaltation.

We see the same jealousy for God's glory in the ministry of Jesus. The portraits we often get of Jesus tend to be limited to his attributes that we find com-

1 Some key passages that show God's jealousy for his own glory are Ex. 10:1–2; Isa. 48:9–11; Ezek. 20:42–44; 36:21–23; 39:25; Matt. 4:10; Mark 8:38; John 12:28–29; 17:1–5; Acts 12:23; 2 Cor. 4:7, 15; and Heb. 1:4–14.

forting, like his compassion and mercy. Jesus certainly is compassionate and merciful, and tells his followers to turn the other cheek and love their enemies (Matt. 5:39). But what do we make of Jesus flipping over tables in the temple (John 2:14–15)? That doesn't seem to be the Jesus most hear about on Sunday morning! The godly jealousy of Jesus stands behind his righteous indignation as he drove out the money-changers with a whip. His disciples recognized this attitude as the same one that drove David. They recalled his words from Psalm 69 after Jesus cleansed the temple: "His disciples remembered that it was written, 'zeal [*zelos*] for your house will consume me'" (John 2:17).

Jesus is often thought of as very different from the God of the Old Testament. But he spoke often of hell, and one of the last images we have of Jesus in the Bible is so terrifying that unrepentant people are crying out for rocks to fall on them rather than face "the wrath of the Lamb" (Rev. 6:16). Jesus is indeed gracious and loving, but his grace and love are ultimately driven by God's glory. His jealous love caused him to hate sin and all that dishonors God so much that he gave his life to vanquish evil and idolatry once and for all.

JEALOUS WITH GOD'S JEALOUSY

The prevalence of a consumer mentality and human-centeredness in contemporary society easily leads our agendas and takes greater priority than God's glory. A desire to be relevant and attractive can encourage a marketing mentality in the church that lacks jealousy for God's honor. The heavy influence of secular psychology, with its therapeutic, self-centered approach to ministry, also can detract from God's glory being the supreme objective when Christians gather. These influences can lead the church to become a pragmatically oriented self-help group rather than a God-glorifying community.

On the other hand, when God's people deeply desire that he be glorified so that nothing competes with him for our devotion and worship, they should experience a godly jealousy that mirrors his. The Bible includes many examples of godly people who are jealous for God's honor. Whenever religious reform and revival was brought about in Israel, behind it always stood a jealous leader.

Whether it was Hezekiah smashing the sacred pillars and cutting down Asherah poles (2 Kings 18:3–4; 19:15–19), Jehoiada tearing down the house and altars of Baal (2 Kings 11:17–18), or Josiah removing the high places (2 Kings 23:19), jealousy on behalf of God’s name, and his exclusive right to receive worship and covenant fidelity, was a primary motivating emotion.

Among the many examples and individuals who express godly jealousy, five of them stand out as the strongest: Phinehas, David, Elijah, Jesus, and Paul. The key passages that epitomize this attribute for each of them are Numbers 25 (Phinehas), Psalm 69:9 (David), 1 Kings 19:10–14 (Elijah), John 2:13–17 (Jesus), and 2 Corinthians 11:1–4 (Paul). Each shows his intense desire for the preservation of God’s honor in the face of a challenge to that honor.

Consider Phinehas, for example. Phinehas is not a well-known Old Testament figure today, but he should be. He killed an Israelite man and a Midianite woman who were flagrantly rebelling against God in the midst of Israel’s repentance for rampant unfaithfulness (Num. 25:6–9). God responds by saying that Phinehas atoned for the sins of the people, stopped a plague, and saved many lives because he was jealous for God’s honor in a way that reflected God’s jealousy (Num. 25:10–13). He stands as a Christ type when it is said that he is given a perpetual priesthood in addition to being a source of atonement (Num. 25:13).

DIFFERENT WEAPONS

God calls Christians today to feel the jealous anger and indignation that all of the godly leaders in the Bible (like Phinehas) experienced. However, in this day of terrorist attacks in the name of God’s honor, we will be quick to acknowledge that there are significant distinctions between the Old Testament saint, operating under the law-based theocracy, and the New Testament Christian, operating under the new covenant and the lordship of Christ. In addition to the roles of men like Phinehas, David, and Elijah, their theocratic context was based on Old Testament law-covenant and direct commands of God. This limits the bloody expression of their jealousy to their historical situation. Phinehas’s killing of Zimri and Cozbi, David’s killing of Goliath, and Elijah’s destruction of the prophets of

Baal were appropriate manifestations of their godly jealousy for their contexts, but they no longer represent God's methods under the new covenant.

In the New Testament, we still see God himself taking drastic, physical action on those who dishonor him (Acts 5:5–10; 12:23). But when it comes to humans, a shift takes place in the New Testament where jealousy for God's honor is now channeled through gospel proclamation and is, in some measure, put on hold until God unleashes his final judgment (Rom. 12:19–21). Jesus himself frowned upon violent reactions to behaviors that were dishonoring to God. He rebuked Peter when he cut off Malchus's ear (Matt. 26:52). His response to James and John when they wanted to call down fire to consume the inhospitable Samaritans seems to teach the same idea. He rebuked them and said, "You do not know what manner of spirit you are of; for the Son of Man came not to destroy people's lives but to save them" (Luke 9:55–56).

Paul provides the same perspective: "Though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds" (2 Cor. 10:3–4). And again: "We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12). The godly Christian hates idolatry no less than Phinehas, yet Christ calls him to fight with different weapons. Phinehas's spear has been replaced by Paul's epistles. The enemies of God deserve the same bold indignation David felt, but righteousness, the gospel of peace, and the sword of the Spirit have replaced his stones.

Christian leaders may think godly jealousy has little to do with most ministry endeavors, but central to our calling is that we abhor and denounce false teaching, even if we will be considered divisive, intolerant, and uncharitable (Titus 1:9; Rom. 12:9). Any distortion of the truth of God's word among God's people amounts to idolatry and spiritual adultery. A faithful pastor will react with godly jealousy, among other virtues (2 Tim. 2:22–26), whenever the clear teaching of Scripture is violated. In a proper effort to be irenic, gracious, and fair, it nevertheless will be impossible to remain ambivalent when God's word

is ignored or distorted, especially by those who claim to be his covenant people. God, whose name is Jealous, demands that his people remain devoted to the true gospel without compromise. The church is to be “a pillar and buttress of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15), and its leaders are to “guard the good deposit entrusted” to us (2 Tim. 1:14), so its theological gatekeepers must remain vigilant in these efforts.

FAITHFUL BRIDE

What a staggering and wonderful truth—that the God who is perfectly self-sufficient (Ps. 50:12; Acts 17:24–25) has chosen to enter into an intimate relationship with his people to the point where he feels jealous anger if we are unfaithful to him! And what a blessed joy to know that, by faith in Christ, the only perfect covenant-keeper, we can rest assured that one day we will be presented to our Lord pure and conformed to his image (1 John 3:2–3).

Until that day, may the God whose name is Jealous be honored through the surprising faithfulness of his bride, even when she is prone to wander.²

2 For more on godly jealousy, see Erik Thoennes, *Godly Jealousy: A Theology of Intolerant Love* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2005); Erik Thoennes, “For the Sake of the Name: Godly Jealousy as a Foundation of Evangelism and Discipleship,” in *Fulfilling the Great Commission in the Twenty-First Century: Essays on Revival, Evangelism, and Discipleship in Honor of Dr. Robert Coleman*, ed. Lyle W. Dorsett and Ajith Fernando (Franklin, TN: Seedbed, 2015); Erik Thoennes, “Sinners in the Hands of a Jealous God,” interview by Matthew Barrett, *Credo Magazine*, July 1, 2015, <https://credomag.com/2015/07/sinners-in-the-hands-of-a-jealous-god-interview-with-erik-thoennes-2/>.