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## What Does the Bible Say About God's Jealousy?

### ***The Meaning of God's Jealousy***

The root idea in the Old Testament word *jealous* is 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 dear to us. 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. God is zealous—eager about protecting what is precious to Him.

One thing He views as especially important to Him in the Old Testament is the nation Israel. She belongs to Him as His special possession, His unique treasure.

For the LORD has chosen Jacob for Himself,  
Israel for His own possession

***(Psalm 135:4 - For the LORD hath chosen Jacob unto himself, and Israel for his peculiar treasure.)***

In fact, He views her as His wife. Through the Prophet Hosea He said to the nation, “And I will betroth you to Me forever”

***(Hosea 2:19 - And I will betroth thee unto me for ever; yea, I will betroth thee unto me in righteousness, and in judgment, and in loving-kindness, and in mercies.)***

No man with any moral fiber wants to share his wife with another man, and neither does God. He expects exclusive devotion from her. When she goes after other lovers, that is, when she worships other gods and thus commits spiritual adultery, He is said to be jealous. When the term jealousy is applied to God in Scripture it is usually because His people are worshipping idols. In the second of His ten commandments He warned them not to do that, but they failed to listen to Him.

For they provoked Him with their high places,  
And aroused His jealousy with their graven images ***(Psalm 78:58 - For they provoked him to anger with their high places, and moved him to jealousy with their graven images.)***

That same idea is present in the New Testament. After a discussion of idolatry in the church of Corinth, Paul asks, “Or do we provoke the Lord to jealousy?” ***(1 Corinthians 10:22 - Do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? are we stronger than he?)***

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The marital relationship may be the best way to help us understand the difference between sinful jealousy and righteous jealousy. I can be jealous over my relationship with my wife in a wrong way or in a right way. For example, if I feel resentment or anger merely because I see her talking to another man, that would be self-centered possessiveness and unreasonable domination—in other words, sinful jealousy. It would stem from my own selfishness or insecurity rather than from my commitment to her and to what is right.

But, on the other hand, if I see some man actually trying to alienate my wife's affections and seduce her, then I have reason to be righteously jealous. God gave her to me to be my wife. Her body is mine just as my body is hers. I have the exclusive right to enjoy her fully, and for someone else to assume that right would be a violation of God's holy standards. I am zealous for the exclusiveness and purity of our marriage, and that is a righteous jealousy. Jehovah feels the same way about His relationship with His "wife." There is no selfishness in His jealousy. It is the appropriate expression of His holiness.

There is a difference between jealousy and envy in Scripture. They are two entirely different words in the Greek New Testament. Jealousy involves the desire to have what somebody else has. That may be wholesome, particularly when we desire to develop in our own lives the positive spiritual qualities we see in others, or when we seek to enjoy the spiritual riches which are ours in Christ just as we see others enjoying them. In like manner, God wants what is His: the exclusive devotion of His people. It is only right and good that He should. But for us, jealousy may degenerate into something bad, as when we feel frustrated and bitter because we cannot obtain what we want, or when we find fault with those who have what we want or who keep us from getting it. God is not capable of experiencing that sinful jealousy. The point is, jealousy can be either good or bad.

On the other hand, envy is nearly always bad. It is a feeling of displeasure over the blessings others are enjoying and it makes us want to deprive them of that enjoyment. Jealousy wants what others have, while envy wants to keep them from having it. It is a vicious and malicious trait which Solomon calls "rotteness to the bones" (**Proverbs 14:30 - *A sound heart is the life of the flesh: but envy the rottenness of the bones.***).

There are some notorious examples of sinful jealousy and envy in Scripture. For example, because of Joseph's favored position with his father and because of the regal coat which Jacob gave him, "his brothers were jealous of him" (**Genesis 37:11 - *And his brethren envied him; but his father observed the saying.***). Their sinful attitudes resulted in sinful acts; first they plotted his death, then cast him into a pit, and finally sold him into slavery. Selfishness and sinfulness were written all over their lives.

Another example of sinful jealousy is found in the book of Acts when the apostles preached with power and performed miracles of healing. Multitudes were added to the Lord and the Jewish religious rulers were furious over this threat to their position and authority. Scripture records, "they were filled with jealousy" (**Acts 5:17 - *Then the high priest rose up, and all they***

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*that were with him, (which is the sect of the Sadducees,) and were filled with indignation,).* First, they threw the apostles into prison and later had them flogged. Their selfish motives were unmistakable.

When we are jealous in a sinful way, we often try to hurt others, just as Joseph's brothers and the Jewish religious leaders did. We pick at them, find fault with them, and gossip about them. Critical attitudes toward other people are often spawned by selfish jealousy. But there is not a trace of selfishness in God's jealousy. It is perfectly pure, as its expressions reveal.

### **[The Manifestation of God's Jealousy](#)**

***He Is Jealous for His Holy Name.*** It wasn't long after God first spoke of His jealousy that He had occasion to demonstrate it. Moses had come down from the mount with the two tablets of the law in his hands only to find the people of Israel carousing in idolatrous worship before the golden image of a calf. He dashed the tablets to the earth, burned the calf and ground it to powder, then commanded the Levites to discipline the people. It was a vivid expression of God's jealousy operating through His servant Moses.

When the crisis was past, God invited Moses back to the mount for a fresh encounter with Himself. That was when He revealed His glory to Moses as no one had ever seen it before. Moses saw Him as a compassionate, gracious, long-suffering God who abounds in mercy and truth (***Exodus 34:6 - And the LORD passed by before him, and proclaimed, The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth,***). The culmination of that revelation came a few moments later when God said, "Watch yourself that you make no covenant with the inhabitants of the land into which you are going, lest it become a snare in your midst. But rather, you are to tear down their altars and smash their sacred pillars and cut down their Asherim—for you shall not worship any other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God" (***Exodus 34:12-14***–

***<sup>12</sup>Take heed to thyself, lest thou make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land whither thou goest, lest it be for a snare in the midst of thee:***

***<sup>13</sup>But ye shall destroy their altars, break their images, and cut down their groves:***

***<sup>14</sup>For thou shalt worship no other god: for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God:***

God's name is the epitome of who and what He is, and He says His name is Jealous. Jealousy is not merely a passing mood with God. It is the essence of His person. He cannot be other than jealous. Since He is the highest and greatest being there is, infinitely holy and glorious, He must be passionately committed to preserving His honor and supremacy. He must zealously desire exclusive devotion and worship. To do less would make Him less than God. He said about Himself:

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I am the LORD, that is My name;  
I will not give My glory to another,  
Nor My praise to graven images

***(Isaiah 42:8 - I am the LORD: that is my name: and my glory will I not give to another, neither my praise to graven images.)***

God is sovereign and supreme over all. Were He to share His glory with other so-called gods, He would be elevating them to a position that would not be consistent with their true nature, and it likewise would be making Him untrue to His own nature—less than the preeminent God He is. He must be faithful to Himself and maintain His high and holy position, and He wants His creatures to attribute to Him that degree of honor. Basically, that is what He means when He says, “I shall be jealous for My holy name” (***Ezekiel 39:25 - Therefore thus saith the Lord GOD; Now will I bring again the captivity of Jacob, and have mercy upon the whole house of Israel, and will be jealous for my holy name;***). His jealousy does not grow out of insecurity, anxiety, frustration, covetousness, pride, or spite, as ours usually does. It is the natural and necessary by-product of His absolute sovereignty and infinite holiness.

If God, by virtue of His essential being, must be jealous for His uniqueness and His supremacy above all, then those who know Him and want to please Him should be just as jealous for Him. If we are serious about our relationship with Him, we shall exalt Him above everyone and everything else in our lives; we shall be absolutely dedicated to living for His honor; we shall be zealously committed to doing His will. The primary goal of our lives will be to show the world that our God is the one true and living God—that He alone makes life meaningful and worthwhile.

That is the way the prophet Elijah lived his life. He risked his physical safety to prove that Jehovah is God when he stood alone against the prophets of Baal and called down fire from Heaven on his water-soaked sacrifice. The fire of the Lord did fall, and it consumed the sacrifice, the wood, the stones, the dust, and licked up the water in the trench around the altar. “And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces; and they said, ‘The LORD, He is God; the LORD, He is God’” (***1 Kings 18:39 - And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces: and they said, The LORD, he is the God; the LORD, he is the God.***). It was a spectacular victory for the Lord over the pagan idols of the Canaanites. And it all happened because that one lone prophet could say, “I have been very jealous for the LORD God of hosts” (***1 Kings 19:14 - And he said, I have been very jealous for the LORD God of hosts: because the children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away.***).

We live in a pagan society where money is god and material possessions are the chief object of man’s worship. We need people who will be very jealous for the Lord God of hosts, people who will stand alone if need be against this insidious and contagious brand of

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idolatry and show the world that the Lord is God, people who will adopt a simpler lifestyle and use their resources for His glory rather than for their own comforts and pleasures.

In our pagan society, Satan holds the adoration of some and superstition grips the hearts of others, alternative brands of idolatry which suggest that supernatural forces other than God have ultimate control of our lives. We need a nucleus of people who will be jealous for the Lord God of hosts, who will stand against every expression of idolatry, who will look solely to the Lord and His Word for guidance and strength rather than to horoscopes or lucky charms, and who will allow Him to control their lives so thoroughly that His sovereign power is evident to all who observe them.

The Apostle Paul qualified for that company. “According to my earnest expectation and hope, that I shall not be put to shame in anything, but that with all boldness, Christ shall even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain”

(**Philippians 1:20-21** –

*<sup>20</sup>According to my earnest expectation and my hope, that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but that with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ shall be magnified in my body, whether it be by life, or by death.*

*<sup>21</sup>For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.)*

His great desire was to bring glory to Jesus Christ, to show the world by the way he lived and by the way he died the magnificence and preeminence of the Saviour. That is being jealous for God.

We see it again in Paul’s last visit with the Ephesian elders: “But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, in order that I may finish my course, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God” (**Acts 20:24 - But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God.**). The focus of his life was communicating the truth of God’s grace. He let nothing interfere with that overriding purpose. Whatever else he had to do was always secondary to and supportive of accomplishing that goal, and he maintained it even to death. That is what it means to be jealous for God.

Forty great soldiers from Cappadocia in Rome’s vaunted twelfth legion shared Paul’s jealousy for God some two hundred fifty years after his death. Licinius was reigning over the eastern portion of the empire but was sensing an increasing military threat from the west. He became more and more repressive in his policies, particularly toward Christians. To solidify

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his strength, he called on his armies to demonstrate their support by offering a sacrifice to the pagan gods.

Most of the legion stationed at Sebaste, a city south of the Black Sea, dutifully complied, but the forty Cappadocians, all Christians, respectfully declined. For more than a week they were placed under guard, where they sang and prayed together continually. Their captain pleaded with them: “Of all the soldiers who serve the emperor, none are more loved by us and more needed right now. Do not turn our love into hatred. It lies in you whether to be loved or hated.” “If it rests with us,” they replied, “we have made our choice. We shall devote our love to our God.”

It was sundown when they were stripped and escorted shivering to the middle of a frozen lake with guards stationed along the shore. A heated Roman bathhouse stood ready at the shore for any of them who were prepared to renounce their faith in Christ and offer a pagan sacrifice. Their jailer stood by with arms folded, watching, as a bitter winter wind whipped across the ice. But through the whistling wind the soldiers could be heard singing:

Forty good soldiers for Christ!  
We shall not depart from You as long as You give us life.  
We shall call upon Your Name whom all creation praises:  
Fire and hail, snow and wind and storm.  
On You we have hoped and we were not ashamed!

As midnight approached, their song grew more feeble. Then a strange thing happened. One of the forty staggered toward shore, fell to his knees and began crawling toward the bathhouse. “Thirty-nine good soldiers for Christ!” came the weakening, trembling song from the distance. The jailer watched the man enter the bathhouse and emerge quickly, apparently overcome by the heat, then collapse on the ground and expire. The other guards could not believe what they saw next. The jailer wrenched off his armor and coat, dashed to the edge of the lake, lifted his right hand and cried, “Forty good soldiers for Christ!” then disappeared over the ice into the darkness.

All forty were dead by the next day, but it was the jailer who caught the captain’s notice as their bodies were being carted away. “What is he doing there?” he demanded. One of the guards replied, “We cannot understand it, Captain. Ever since those Christians came under his care, we noticed something different about him.” The martyrs of Sebaste were jealous for the name of their God, and it had a profound impact on that jailer who looked on. Our jealousy for God will have a similar effect on the people around us.<sup>6</sup>

We should be reminded, however, that it is possible to be jealous for God in the wrong way. Paul accused the Jews of his day of having a misdirected jealousy: “For I bear them witness that they have a zeal [jealousy] for God, but not in accordance with knowledge” (**Romans 10:2 - For I bear them record that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge.**). The

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Jews thought they were exalting the Lord above all gods, but in their system of salvation by performing religious rituals and deeds they actually exalted themselves above God. It was a jealousy for God all right, but not consistent with the knowledge God has revealed about Himself in His Word.

The discovery that God is jealous for His holy name is not a challenge to become religious. It is a challenge to put our trust in God's gracious provision for our salvation—the death of His sinless Son—and a challenge to develop a way of life that reveals Him to a lost world.

***He Is Jealous for Our Best Interests.*** Not only is God jealous for Himself, but He is also jealous for us. He has a passionate, consuming zeal for our best interests, and He wants us to share that zeal by being jealous for one another.

When the mighty Assyrians threatened to destroy the city of Jerusalem, King Hezekiah brought their insolent threats before the Lord in prayer. God's answer, delivered by the prophet Isaiah, reassured Hezekiah that God would put a hook in the nose of Assyria's king and lead him right back to where he came from (***Isaiah 37:29 - Because thy rage against me, and thy tumult, is come up into mine ears, therefore will I put my hook in thy nose, and my bridle in thy lips, and I will turn thee back by the way by which thou camest.***). Jerusalem would be saved. "*For out of Jerusalem shall go forth a remnant, and out of Mount Zion survivors. The zeal of the LORD of hosts shall perform this*" (***Isaiah 37:32 - For out of Jerusalem shall go forth a remnant, and they that escape out of mount Zion: the zeal of the LORD of hosts shall do this.***). Because God was jealous for His people and wanted them to have what was best for them, He would protect them through that siege and deliver them from destruction.

Later God allowed the nation Israel to be disciplined by the Babylonians. He loved them dearly and His discipline was the expression of that love. But then He was ready to restore them and bless them, so he said, "I am exceedingly jealous for Jerusalem and Zion" (***Zechariah 1:14 - So the angel that communed with me said unto me, Cry thou, saying, Thus saith the LORD of hosts; I am jealous for Jerusalem and for Zion with a great jealousy.***). Then He described what He was about to do: He will return to Jerusalem with mercy and rebuild His house there. He will cause the towns of Israel to overflow with prosperity and provide comfort for Zion once more (***Zechariah 1:16-17 -***

***<sup>16</sup>Therefore thus saith the LORD; I am returned to Jerusalem with mercies: my house shall be built in it, saith the LORD of hosts, and a line shall be stretched forth upon Jerusalem.***

***<sup>17</sup>Cry yet, saying, Thus saith the LORD of hosts; My cities through prosperity shall yet be spread abroad; and the LORD shall yet comfort Zion, and shall yet choose Jerusalem.***

God is jealous for those whom He loves and takes positive steps to help them, just as we are jealous for those whom we love when they are threatened, wronged, or abused. He

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wants only the best for us, and at this very moment He is planning things that will bring benefit and blessing to our lives.

God wants us to have the same attitude toward each other as fellow believers: to be jealous for one another's best interests. Paul said Epaphras felt that way toward his Christian friends at Colosse: "For I bear him record, that he hath a great zeal for you, and them that are in Laodicea, and them in Hierapolis" (**Colossians 4:13** - *For I bear him record, that he hath a great zeal for you, and them that are in Laodicea, and them in Hierapolis.*). His jealousy for them led him to pray for them daily, as the context indicates. If we shared God's jealousy for other believers, we would be busily engaged in intercessory prayer, faithfully bringing their needs to God's attention. Our prayer lives would not be wholly occupied with our own problems, but we would beseech God on behalf of the specific needs of others in the body of Christ.

The Apostle Paul also shared God's jealousy for other Christians. When his converts at Corinth began to fall for the subtle perversion of the gospel being propagated by Satan's servants who had infiltrated the church, Paul said, "For I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy; for I betrothed you to one husband, that to Christ I might present you as a pure virgin" (**2 Corinthians 11:2** - *For I am jealous over you with godly jealousy: for I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ.*). As their spiritual father, he had promised them to Christ, their spiritual bridegroom, and it was his desire to present them to their husband as a pure bride, untainted with the distorted doctrine of those false apostles. For that reason, he faithfully taught them the truth at great personal sacrifice and encouraged them to submit to it.

If we shared God's jealousy for others, we too would be filling our minds with God's truth and graciously sharing it with those whom God sends our way. We would want what is best for them, and we know that patterning their lives according to His Word will always result in their greatest possible good. If we cared enough we would share the very best—the eternal truths of God's Word.

So our God is a jealous God! The truth of His jealousy challenges us to give God His due and to put Him before all else. But it likewise guarantees that He is looking out for our best interests. Getting to know Him as a jealous God will increase our level of devotion to Him, deepen our trust in Him, and strengthen our dedication to pray for others and faithfully share His truth with them.

### **Action To Take:**

Examine your life style prayerfully. Have other things assumed a more prominent place in your life than your relationship with the Lord Himself? If so, take some decisive and concrete steps to put Him in the position He deserves to be.



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Are you jealous for the spiritual welfare of other believers? If you have never done so, begin making a list of others' needs and bring them before the Lord daily in prayer.