

Covenant Love

Deuteronomy 4

David Sunday September 20, 2020



I want to focus your attention today on what God reveals about Himself in Deuteronomy 4:24: *“For the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God.”* If you were writing a worship song about the attributes of God, would you think to praise Him for His jealousy? It sounds offensive to us, conjuring up images of an insecure, abusive husband. The atheist Richard Dawkins once said, “The God of the Old Testament has got to be the most unpleasant character in all of fiction. He’s jealous and proud of it.”

We typically think of jealousy as a soul-destroying, cancerous vice. As Shakespeare said in Othello, “The green-eyed monster which doth mock the meat it feeds on.” How then could anyone imagine that jealousy is found in God, Who is a good, good Father? That’s the question J.I. Packer asks in chapter 17 of Knowing God with this instructive answer:

The first step in answering this question, “How then could anyone ever imagine that jealousy is found in God?” is to make it clear that this is not a case of imagining anything. Were we imagining a God, then naturally we should ascribe to Him only characteristics which we admired—and jealousy would not enter the picture. Nobody would imagine a jealous God.

But we are not making up an idea of God by drawing upon our imagination. We are seeking instead to listen to the words of Holy Scripture, in which God Himself tells us the truth about Himself. The Bible is God’s public record and throughout the pages of Scripture, God goes on record telling us that He is indeed a jealous God. In fact, He even says in Exodus 34:14 that His very name is Jealous; He is jealous about His relationship with you and with me.

My aim this morning is first to show you why the jealousy of God is better news than you think; second, to show us what provokes God’s jealousy; then third, how to live in covenant love with a jealous God. But first, let’s pray together.

We need Your help, God. So we pray, O holy fire, love’s purest light, please burn all desires until You are our one delight. O God, we pray You would move us to love You so much

that we will lose our love for whatever keeps us from You. You are worthy, Father, to be loved with our whole heart, with our whole soul, with our whole mind and with our whole strength, just as You have loved us so unreservedly in Christ when we least deserved it. So we ask this in the name of Jesus, praying for the help of Your Spirit as I preach and as we hear Your Word. Amen.

Why the jealousy of God is better news than you think.

The jealousy of God is better news than we realize—better news than Richard Dawkins thinks, for sure.

Children, here's a question I hope you'll be able to answer in a few minutes: why is the jealousy of God good news for those who trust in Him?

Part of the reason the words “jealous” and “jealousy” have negative connotations for us is that we tend to equate envy with jealousy, but they're not the same. Envy and jealousy are different things. Here's a clarifying distinction from Andrew Wilson:

Jealousy is the desire to keep for yourself what rightfully belongs to you.
Envy is the desire to have for yourself what rightfully belongs to another.
Envy is when a husband wants to sleep with somebody else's wife.
Jealousy is when he doesn't want his wife to sleep with somebody else's husband.

So envy is always sinful. You shall not covet your neighbor's house, car, personality, physique, athletic ability, job situation, salary, wife or well-behaved children. Desiring to have for yourself what rightfully belongs to another is envy which is always sinful. But jealousy—desiring to keep for yourself what is rightfully yours—is not always sinful. It can rise to sinful proportions and is often expressed in sinful ways, but jealousy is sometimes the most appropriate expression of love in a relationship, when that relationship is being threatened. It would be absurd to say that God is envious because there's nothing God wants that God doesn't have. So the Bible never attributes envy to God.

The Bible does say that God is jealous because there are things God has—things that belong rightfully to Him—that He doesn't want to lose, like His people—Israel and us. God has entered into a covenant with Israel—His people—and He is jealous not to lose us. He has entered into a covenant with those who belong to Jesus and is jealous not to let anything come between us and Him.

That's good news, because it means God loves you infinitely more than you can realize, more than you can even imagine. He has taken you to be His beloved in a living, loving, lasting

union. This means God's love for you cannot be indifferent when your heart is wandering away from Him. He can't just sit idly by and watch that happen. He has a passionate anger that rises up against anything that would destroy you and your love relationship with Him.

So the jealousy of God is better news than you think, because it means God views His relationship with us as a covenant of love. God doesn't see our relationship with Him as a cold contract that either we or He can cancel at will. Our relationship with God is far more personal and far more intimate than just a cold, clinical contract.

Nor does God view our relationship with Him as a casual friendship that you or He can walk out of whenever you feel like it. Our relationship with Him is more binding and more accountable than that. God has entered into a covenant of love with us. What is a covenant? It is a solemn bond that's been sealed in blood with expectations that go both ways. God makes promises to His covenant people that He will never forsake, that He has sworn an oath for and confirmed in blood. He also has expectations from us and for us that He will not overlook. To be in a covenant relationship with God means He is jealous for you. He loves you too much to let you walk away from Him without consequences—and that's the first reason God's jealousy is better news for you than you think.

It's also better news than we sometimes think because it means God is passionately committed to whatever will bring you the most joy and ruthlessly opposed to whatever stands in the way of your everlasting joy in Him. That's good news.

Human jealousy is not always good news. Because we are sinners, our jealousy is always tainted by selfishness. Even in the best of loves, there's always some ulterior motive. We never perfectly and purely love someone for their own sake. We're always tempted to use people—even people we love the most—to get some need met in ourselves. But what if there was a perfectly pure lover who was selflessly, sacrificially and eternally committed to the good of his beloved? If that were true, if there were such a lover, then the best thing in the world you could possibly experience would be to be loved by him and to live in a covenant of love toward him.

I heard Tim Keller describe how C.S. Lewis, in the third chapter of his book The Problem of Pain, describes how an artist, when he's drawing a picture for a child, will make his sketch just to amuse the child. That artist won't take a whole lot of pains over that little sketch; it's just a thumbnail sketch. But when it comes to the magnum opus of that artist's life, he will spare no pain. He will rub and scrape and start over again for the tenth time, for the hundredth time, until he perfects that work.

Here's the point. We are the magnum opus of God's creation. We alone, of all the things God has made, are created in the image of God. God will spare no pains in shaping us and conforming us according to His glorious design. He is jealous about His work in us and will not rest until it is perfected. That's not always going to feel good, but it is good. Lewis put it like this:

It is natural for us to wish that God designed us for a less glorious and less arduous destiny, but then, we are wishing, not for more love, but for less. You asked for a loving God? You have one. Not a senile benevolence that drowsily wishes you to be happy in your own way, but the consuming fire Himself, the Love that made the worlds, persistent as an artist's love for his work. It is certainly a burden of glory, not only beyond our deserts, but also beyond our desiring.

We should not ask that God's love should reconcile itself to our present impurities—not more than the beggar maid could wish that the king should be content with her rags and dirt. What we would here and now call our happiness—the things we think will make us happy—is not the end God chiefly has in view. When we are such as He can love without impediment, we shall finally be happy.

What does he mean? He means God knows the only way you and I will ever be truly, deeply and eternally full of joy is when we are so filled with His love for us and so filled up with love for Him that nothing else matters. So like a master artist, God will rub, scrape, tear and start again in your life, until you are finally at a place where nothing matters more to you than being fully known and fully loved by Him, loving Him in return.

God loves you so much that He will passionately and ruthlessly oppose anything that comes into your life that gets between you and Him, and between you loving Him with your whole heart, soul, mind and strength. That might not feel like good news, but it really is better news than you think. Because loving God and being loved by Him is the only thing in the universe that will bring you everlasting joy; it's the only thing that will matter in the end.

So I hope you can see that God's jealousy is an attribute we should adore rather than abhor. It's good news, because it speaks to the depth, intensity and covenantal tenacity of God's love for us.

What provokes God's jealousy?

Secondly, I want us to look at what provokes God's jealousy. There are two behaviors in Deuteronomy 4 that provokes the jealousy of God: forgetfulness and its twin brother idolatry.

Both of these are born out of the same womb, out of the womb with a heart that is prone to wander from the Lord Who loves us so. Look at verse nine:

Only be on your guard and diligently watch yourselves, so that you don't forget the things your eyes have seen and so that they don't slip from your mind as long as you live. Teach them to your children and your grandchildren.

Don't forget what God has done for you, he's saying. Look down at verses 23 and 24:

Be careful not to forget the covenant of the LORD your God that he made with you, and make an idol for yourselves in the shape of anything he has forbidden you. For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God.

Forgetfulness and its twin brother idolatry go hand in hand. You and I remember what matters to us. You can't will yourself into forgetting something. In fact, there are some things you wish you could forget, yet the more you try to forget them, the more you remember them. You remember what you concentrate your attention upon; you concentrate your attention on what matters most to you. Often the things we forget are forgotten because we were kind of indifferent toward them. It didn't matter enough to us. We didn't take the time to concentrate our attention. Forgetfulness is a sign of indifference and neglect.

Moses is reminding the people of God what makes the relationship with God so unique and incomparable: they have heard the voice of God and they have experienced the saving activity of God on their behalf. He's saying, "If it matters to you that out of all the people on the face of the earth, you are the people who have actually heard God's voice speaking intelligibly, giving a covenant in the form of commandments and statutes—and if it matters to you that you, out of all the people on the face of this earth, have experienced the saving activity of God reaching down from heaven and rescuing you from your enemies—then you will be careful and will watch yourself diligently, lest you forget this God of grace and glory."

In verses 1-14, Moses emphasizes that they are a people who have heard God's word. He starts in verse one with, "*Listen to the statutes and ordinances I am teaching you to follow...*" In verse two he says these words are sufficient and complete. Don't add to them or take away from them. Don't corrupt, weaken or destroy any part of God's word. Instead, he says, "*...keep the commands of the Lord your God...*" because it's been rightfully said, "The only part of the Bible you truly believe is the part you obey."

In verses five and six he says these words from God are what set us apart as unique and what make our lives wise and attractive, when we take to heart the words God has spoken to us. This is God's purpose. He has a missional intent. He wants the nations to see that God's people

are wise and attractive, because they keep the words God has spoken to them. In verses seven and eight we see how this word God has spoken shows us how near He is to His people. He's ready to hear us whenever we call on Him.

Then verses 9-14 emphasize how this God Who has spoken to His people so remarkably—out of the fire on the mountain, giving them this covenant and these commandments—is a God Who deserves and Who commands our full attention and our obedience. Don't forget the God Who has spoken.

Then look down at verses 32-40. These verses highlight how these are a people who have experienced God's acts of salvation and deliverance on their behalf. Children, you have a question on your worksheet: what did God do for the Israelites that no other nation has ever experienced? The answer is right here in verses 32-35. Let's listen together:

Indeed, ask about the earlier days that preceded you, from the day God created mankind on the earth and from one end of the heavens to the other: Has anything like this great event ever happened, or has anything like it been heard of?

What event is he talking about? Listen to verse 33: *"Has a people heard God's voice speaking from the fire as you have, and lived?"* This is referring to the time God gave the covenant to Moses on Mt. Sinai. Now look at verse 34: *"Or has a god..."*—any of the gods of the other nations, any of the false gods, the idols—*"attempted to go and take a nation as his own out of another nation, by trials, signs, wonders and war, by a strong hand and outstretched arm by great terrors, as the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes?"*

There it is. God rescued His people from Egypt. He delivered them from Pharaoh and his great army. No other nation has ever experienced this. No other people have experienced a god who reaches down from heaven and saves like this. That's the unprecedented act of God's mercy and power for Israel. God had a specific purpose in mind in doing all this for His people. Look at verse 35: *"You were shown these things so that you would know that the Lord is God; there is no other besides him."*

He alone is God and He wants you to know Him and worship Him. When you know Him and worship Him, obedience will flow from your heart. Obedience flows from a heart of love toward this God Whom we know. If His deeds of love, mercy and deliverance matter to us, we will love Him and obey Him.

But what happens when we forget these things? When we forget God's salvation? Moses' answer is that we don't just go into neutral. We don't just go into sleep mode. When God's Word is no longer functioning as the lamp to your feet and a light to your path (Psalm 119:105),

when the Bible becomes un compelling to you and it's like you've got earplugs in whenever the Scriptures are being read and preached, when you tune out the Word and ignore and neglect it, when the great news of salvation in Christ becomes like old news to you and no longer moves you and warms your heart with joy, what happens? We turn to idols.

That's the whole point of the middle of this chapter. Verses 15-23 say when we forget God's Word and His saving actions on our behalf, we look to idols instead for our satisfaction. Whenever we do that, we provoke the jealousy of God. The Holy Spirit warns us about this in verses 15-16: *"Diligently watch yourselves—because you did not see any form on the day the Lord spoke to you out of the fire at Horeb—so you don't act corruptly and make an idol for yourselves..."*

Look at the way Moses describes idols in verses 16-20. Scan over these verses in your Bible and notice what they all have in common. They're all good things. There's nothing wrong with men, women, animals, birds, crawling creatures, fish, the sun, the moon or the stars. These are all good things God has made for our good, for our pleasure and for His glory. But when these good things take the place of God in our lives, they become idols. There's a great description from Counterfeit Gods by Tim Keller of what an idol is:

What is an idol? It is anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give. A counterfeit god is anything so central and essential to your life that, should you lose it, your life would hardly feel worth living. An idol is whatever you look at and say in your heart of hearts, "If I had that, then I'd feel like my life has meaning. Then I know I'd have value. Then I'd feel significant and secure."

That's what an idol is. But the thing with idols is they cannot deliver. Look at verse 28. It says these idols cannot see, they cannot hear, they cannot eat and they cannot smell. An idol—a counterfeit god—will never speak to you like God can. It will never come and rescue you like God has done. It will never hear you when you pray to it like God does. And an idol can never satisfy you. But they do control you. They do hold you in bondage.

Do you have anything like this in your life? Anything that's more important to you than God? Anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God? Anything you seek to give you what only God can give? Anything that's so central and essential to your life that, should you lose it, you would feel life is no longer worth living? Anything you look at and say in your heart of hearts, "If I have that, then I'll feel like my life has meaning. I know I'll have value"? Anything like that besides God is going to let you down big time.

Another thing I want you to notice about these idols is the order in which they're listed in verses 16-20. Where does Moses start? He starts with male and female forms, then animals, then winged creatures, then the creatures of the ground, then the fish in the waters under the earth, then the sun, moon and stars in the sky. What does this sound like? It sounds like Genesis 1. It sounds like the days of creation. Only, did you notice, they're being listed in reverse order. That means when we turn to idols we are dismantling God's creation purpose. When we turn to idols, we are disintegrating God's order and design. God's creation is going in reverse when we turn to idols.

Finally, I want you to notice the effect our idolatry has on the heart of God. Look at verse 20: *"But the Lord selected you and brought you out of Egypt's iron furnace to be a people for his inheritance"*—His treasure, His dearly loved ones— *"as you are today."* He chose you. He personally rescued you from bondage in order for you to be His treasure, precious to Him. So when you turn to idols, you are not only breaking His commands, you are breaking His heart. And from God's broken heart comes jealousy, as His love is aroused and in pain.

Can you see that God's jealousy is not what you thought it was? It's not something you should be offended by. It's not something your heart should turn away from. It is something your heart should be melted by. It's something that should convict you of your carelessness toward Him. It's something that should sober you and move you toward repentance. It's something that should give you hope.

If there's a God Who loves you so much that your forgetfulness of Him and your replacement of Him with lesser things can actually arouse in Him a jealousy for you, doesn't that mean that your life matters? That your life has far more significance and eternal significance? Be comforted by this truth. Take hope in this truth.

If you're wanting to repent of your idolatry, you can take direction and take heart from verses 29-31. These verses are speaking about when the Israelites have come under God's discipline for their idolatry. They will experience God's jealous love sending them into exile, which is going to happen in their future. Then they'll realize the futility and folly of their ways. They're going to be humbled, wanting to return to God.

Look at what Moses says in verse 29: *"But from there"*—from the place of discipline, from the place of humbling—*"you will search for the Lord your God, and you will fill him when you seek him with all your heart and all your soul."* Verses 30-31 continue:

When you are in distress and all these things have happened to you, in the future you will return to the Lord your God and obey him. He will not leave you, destroy you, or forget the covenant with your ancestors that he

swore to them by oath, because the Lord your God is a compassionate God.

So in our rebellion and idolatry, we experience the God of verse 24. He is a jealous God, a consuming fire. In our repentance and faith, we discover He's also the God of verse 31: "...*the Lord your God is a compassionate God.*" Where do we see God's consuming fire and compassion in brightest display? It's at the cross of Jesus, where the holy Son of God entered into the consuming fire of God's judgment against our sin, so that sinners like us might enter into a covenant of grace and love with God, Who is so jealous for our love. The cross of Jesus is proof that God will not leave you, destroy you, nor forget the covenant He made with us, His people. The cross of Jesus is where the compassion of God and the consuming fire of God's jealousy meet and kiss one another.

How do we live in covenant love with a jealous God?

That brings me to the last point this morning. How do you live with a jealous God in covenant of love? The answer is in repentance, faith and obedience. Repentance is the act of continually turning away from all that displeases Him. Faith is clinging to Christ, Who lived and died and rose for you. As Moses says in verse four, "Hold on to Him. Cleave to Him." As a man leaves his mother and father and cleaves to his wife, we should cleave to Christ, Who lived and died and rose for us. This means making it your earnest desire to find out what pleases Him because you love Him. The only way to live with a God Who is jealous, Who is a consuming fire is through faith, repentance and obedience.

Yesterday morning in the cool fall weather, I turned on our fireplace for the first time. It was so fun and comforting to sit there, feeling the warmth and seeing the beauty. Fire is like that. It gives warmth. It's beautiful and attractive. It's a source of light. But fire is also dangerous. You don't play with fire. You don't want fire breaking out against you. I want that fire to stay in my fireplace, not in my house.

This is how you know you're in a covenant of love with a jealous God Who is a consuming fire. On the one hand, you see Him as life-giving, majestic and beautiful, so you want to get close to Him. You want to know Him. You see His Word as a lamp for your feet and a light for your path. On the other hand, you tremble before Him. You don't take Him for granted. You don't treat His Word or His commands lightly. You want nothing more than to find out what pleases Him and bring delight to His heart. You love Him, so you obey His commands.

Here's what God is telling us about Himself in this chapter. He's telling us that the God of the Bible is both beautiful and dangerous. He is both loving and holy. He is Savior, King and Judge. He's a consuming fire. You want to get close to Him. You want to be warmed by Him. You want to behold His beauty. But you don't want to trifle with Him. You don't want to treat Him with careless contempt. You don't want to provoke His jealousy.

Jesus has opened the way for you to enter into a covenant of love with this majestic God. He's calling you into fellowship with this God today. If you have not yet done that, you can do that today by putting your trust in Jesus. If you have done that, He welcomes you now to draw near to Him.

As we participate in the holy sacrament of communion together, let's remember that this God Who is jealous and is a consuming fire was broken and crushed for us. Come to Him, as Hebrews 12:28-20 says:

Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful. By it, we may serve God acceptably, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.

Let's bow in prayer before Him.

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