

## The Jealousy of God

*Sermon preached on Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> February 2010 at BHAC, North Turramurra.*

The French art critic and curator Catherine Millet wrote a memoir in 2002 which became a worldwide literary sensation. It was entitled “The Sexual Life of Catherine M.”

The book was hailed (apparently) for its great literary qualities (though, I’ve never read it and don’t intend to!), but the thing that prompted the book’s multi-million sales in 40 different languages was the audacity with which Millet described her sexual exploits over many years with many men, while at the same time sustaining a long-term relationship with her so-called “life partner” Jacques Henric.

The emotionless rationale for her behaviour was, in Millet’s words: “I had love at home...I sought only pleasure in the world outside.” Nonetheless, readers were left wondering “How on earth did her relationship with Henric survive?”

Well, late last year Millet wrote a follow-up to her 2002 memoir. The writing of this latter book was prompted by the fact that one day Millet found a letter in their apartment in which it became clear that Henric was having an affair. The book details Millet’s crisis provoked by this discovery, and her reaction to it.

You can probably guess the title of the book. It is simply entitled “Jealousy.”

In her former book, Millet could calmly and unemotionally rationalise her own promiscuity. But in this latter book, with the boot on the other foot, and feeling betrayed and threatened, she writes *emotively* about how she succumbed to what she describes as that “timeless and universal malady”. Jealousy.

Well, pardon me for that fairly salacious and unedifying introduction, but I do think that it raises the issue that faces us today as we continue our sermon series on the character of God. For as you know, today we are exploring the fact that the Bible clearly says that God is a **jealous god**. But if jealousy is a “malady” in any sense that Millet describes it, and if it typically finds expression in the grubby world of relational infidelity, then what in heaven’s name (we might ask) is God doing displaying *that* characteristic?

This is an important question, and I want us to feel the real force of the tension that it raises. Because after all, jealousy is the sort of emotion that has, for the most part, entirely negative connotations. Jealousy is the expression of the attitude that says (as J. I. Packer puts it):

“You have what I want, and I hate you because I haven’t got it.”<sup>1</sup>

So jealousy expresses itself in hatred, but it also expresses itself in hard-hearted **resentment**, and **envy**, and **bitterness**. It can result in obsessive, highly destructive behaviour that an otherwise rational person would never consider doing, like plotting and scheming to take revenge.

And sadly, jealousy often underlies violence. Just this week, there were three stabbings in Australia that made front page news. In commentary that I read on the internet, jealousy was explicitly mentioned as a potential motive in *two* of those three stabbings.

The point is: jealousy is most often thought of (and rightly so) as a destructive vice; indeed, one of the most cancerous and soul destroying vices there is.

But **God**, who is perfectly good, is very clearly and unambiguously described in the Bible as a jealous God. The question is: *Why?*

Well, I said that jealousy is **most often** thought of as a destructive vice; but of course, it's not *always* and in *every case* a destructive vice. There is a different sort of jealousy which (in the context of a strong relationship) is actually a **virtue**. In a marriage, say, where a high value is placed on the sanctity of the relationship, if there is a threat to that relationship by an outside force, *jealousy* is be a very *positive* thing.

And you can imagine, I'm sure, in that situation that *jealousy* might be expressed as a sort of healthy "closing of the ranks"... in the zealous taking of whatever steps were thought necessary to **protect** the marriage. There might be *anger* on the part of the one who is jealous, but in the best case scenario that anger would be constructively directed towards **building up**, not **tearing down**.

And in fact, you would have to question the **love** or the **moral-** or **emotional-integrity** of a married person who *didn't* feel jealousy if his or her relationship was threatened from outside.

So jealousy isn't *always* destructive; in fact, it can sometimes be healthy and good, especially when it expresses a high value on the sanctity of a relationship.

And of course, it's precisely in this latter, *positive* sense that the Bible describes God as being jealous. It's good that God is jealous! We need God to be jealous! It's a virtue that he is jealous.

And just so that we're clear, we are told again and again (particularly in the OT) that this is the case...that God is jealous. This is *not* an adjective of God's character that occurs on the odd occasion. There are over 25 verses or passages in the Old Testament that describe God's jealousy. (You can read in J. I. Packer's book "Knowing God" a detailed listing of those passages.)

But again, the question remains: *Why* is God jealous, and *why* is it important?

Well, in order for us to understand *why* God is a jealous God we need firstly to understand that God really does see himself as in something like a marriage relationship with his people.

There are a number of verses in the Bible that depict this truth, but perhaps the best and clearest is from Isaiah 54, in which the prophet says to God's people Israel:

For your Maker is your *husband*--  
the LORD Almighty is his name--  
the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer;  
he is called the God of all the earth.

So: God is the god of all the earth, and all the earth needs to know and understand that...but to God's people Isaiah says "Your maker is your *husband*." That's very relational and intimate and emotive language.

Now, there's a technical term in the Bible that is used to depict (a little less emotively) the relationship which God has with his people. It's the word **covenant**. "Covenant" (boiled down) simply means "promise". So, the Old Testament describes God as choosing to enter into a covenant with the people of Israel, meaning that he **promised** to be their God...that he would be faithful to them, that he would love them, watch over them, care for them, bless them, and ultimately bless the whole world through them. He would be like a loving, caring, protecting, nurturing *husband* in that relationship.

Now, *under that covenant* what was expected of God's people *in return* was **unqualified love and loyalty**. God would be their god, *they* would be his people *exclusively*. God's people were expected to live in such a way as to show that they found their **happiness** and their **satisfaction** and their **sustenance** from God alone.

They were to look back at how God had acted in history to **graciously save them** and **provide for them**, and how he continued to do that in the present, and they were to respond with **obedience** and **love** and by worshipping him alone.

Now, in a culture and time when idol worship and polytheism was rampant, perhaps we should not be surprised that one of the first times in the Bible when we read that God describes himself as *jealous*, is in the context of God saying to his people: "do not make or worship idols".

Where is that in the Bible? In the 10 Commandments, given at Mt Sinai. In Exodus 20:4, the second commandment says:

You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; *for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God*, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

The tragedy is, barely six weeks after powerfully redeeming his people from slavery in Egypt... after demonstrating beyond a shadow of doubt his **love for**, and **commitment to** his people, God has to warn them of what their turning to other gods will provoke: that is, his jealousy, resulting in their just punishment.

But the even greater tragedy, of course, is that *that* warning fell on deaf ears. Again and again, as time went on, God had to remind his people that he is a jealous God, precisely because they kept on *breaking* his covenant.

One of those reminders comes in the passage that we heard read this morning, from Deuteronomy 6. The book of Deuteronomy is a series of speeches that Moses gave to the Israelites 40 years after Mt Sinai, as they were on the verge of entering the Promised Land. They were going to be tempted (as they did that) to worship the gods of the people of that land. So Moses says to them:

Fear the LORD your God, serve him only and take your oaths in his name. Do not follow other gods, the gods of the peoples around you; for the LORD your God, who is among you, is a jealous God and his anger will burn against you, and he will destroy you from the face of the land.

So: you can see why it was important for God's people to **know** and **understand** and **respond aright** to the news that God was jealous for the exclusive worship of his people: their very *existence* depended on it. If they failed to serve and worship God alone, then God's righteous anger would be aroused, and they would be destroyed from the face of the land.

(Of course, that's precisely what happened 7 or 8 centuries later, when God's people, having continued to commit idolatry, were exiled from their land and went into captivity in Babylon.)

However, one thing I want to make sure that we understand as we think about the jealousy of God in the context of his relationship with his people, is the *motivation* behind God's jealousy. Yes, God is jealous for the exclusive affections and worship of his people. But why?

To answer that question I want us to have a quick look at a little passage in the writings of the prophet Ezekiel. Ezekiel was a prophet around the time of the exile in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, and he said this to the people:

[T]his is what the Sovereign LORD says: I will now bring Jacob back from captivity and will have compassion on all the people of Israel, and I will be [jealous] for my holy name.

The NIV has the word "zealous" where I've used the word "jealous". But both English words come from the same root in the Biblical languages and are more or less interchangeable.

The point is: this verse **links** God's intention and desire and ability to be compassionate and to rescue his people, with jealousy for his name.

What does that mean? It means **God is jealous (or zealous) to be seen and known as the one true source of mercy and hope.**

Whenever God's people turned to *idols* to find *satisfaction* or *hope* in life, God's name was trampled. It looked like God wasn't able to satisfy their needs. But God is jealous for his good name to be magnified!

He is jealous for his people, and ultimately for the whole world, to see that he is the **great benefactor**, the **inexhaustible fountain of life and power and joy**, and we are the beneficiaries.

He is jealous to preserve and display his reputation for his **goodness** and **compassion**, so that when we trust in him, and receive his mercy, we show him as he really is, and we *glorify* him.

And of course, *that* is our great purpose in life. God has **made us** that we might glorify him and enjoy him for ever. And God has enabled that to happen, of course, not primarily through bringing his OT people back from captivity, but through sending Jesus to bring us to God forever.

So, I want to say this morning that the jealousy of God is wonderful doctrine! It's a **great** thing that God is jealous for his name, and that he is jealous for our worship, because his passion for both led him to send Jesus to the cross and to pave the way for our eternal joy.

So this morning, be encouraged by the jealousy of God! God's jealousy for his name—for his relationship with you—for your worship—spurred him into action and love for you. He has done what was needed to satisfy you, and glorify himself, *forever*.

If you've come to church this morning **weak** and **worn** and **weighed** down, then leave this morning knowing God's commitment to you, his jealousy for you, his grace over you.

But there's also a *challenge*, of course. And it's this: to treat God in our lives in all the ways that befit him as the jealous God who loves us. If it's true that we are his people, and that our relationship with God is like a marriage, with him as the husband who longs for our devotion and faithfulness...well, how should we live?

Answer: As devoted and faithful!

In 2 Corinthians 11, the apostle Paul wrote about this very issue. He said to the Christians in Corinth (who, by the way, were pretty rough round the edges!):

I am 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.

"Be pure...be godly." That's what Paul is saying is the right way to react to the fact that God is like our husband, and righteously jealous for us and for the honour of his name.

And if God is to be **known** by our *friends* and *neighbours* and our *community* as the one that we yearn to be godly for, to honour him...

And if God is to be known as the source of our delight now, and as the never-ending source of our happiness into eternity...then we need to live like that's true today. We need to live in ways that say (unashamedly) "I am zealous for this sovereign, self-sufficient, God."

We do that by living holy lives. We do that by (for example) spending ourselves in his service in all the different ways that it's possible to do that because we know that God fills up from his storehouse of resources those who serve him.

Therefore, for the sake of the name and fame of our great God, and our own joy, let us remember that he is jealous. Let us live lives where we train ourselves (rather than just try!) to be godly and holy. Let us identify those sins in our lives that dishonour him: the idolatry, the compromise.

And let us turn to him who is the source of all joy and drink deeply at his well.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1973), p. 189.