

Nahum's Jealous God

Wayde Miller

The prophet Nahum wasted no time describing God's righteous wrath against the city of Nineveh. He began, "The Lord is a jealous and avenging God; the Lord is avenging and wrathful; the Lord takes vengeance on his adversaries and keeps wrath for his enemies." (Nahum 1:2.) It is interesting that the first descriptive term he uses is "jealous." If we are going to have a proper relationship with God, then this is a term we must get to know.

When we think of the word "jealous," we usually think of it as a sinful attitude. It is an ugly word. Shakespeare called it the "green-eyed monster." We associate selfishness and hostility with jealousy along with resentment toward other people because they enjoy some blessing we don't have. And we want it badly. Jealousy can destroy friendships, marriages, and self-esteem. We see nothing good about it so why would God be involved in something we perceive as bad.

We must understand the difference in jealousy and envy in Scripture. Jealousy is the desire to have what someone else has but that is not always a bad thing. We may see positive Christian qualities in others that we wish to possess ourselves to have a more wholesome life in Christ. We seek to enjoy the spiritual blessings in Christ just as we see others enjoy them. That's a good use of jealousy. On the other hand, envy is always a bad thing in the Bible. Envy is the displeasure we feel over the blessings of others, so much displeasure that we want them to be deprived of their happiness.

Now, when jealousy and envy are combined, it leads to no good thing. Joseph was sold into slavery because his brothers were "jealous of him" and the favor he had with his father Jacob (Gen. 37:11.) When the gospel was being successfully preached in Jerusalem, the Jewish leaders had the apostles put in prison and flogged because they were "filled with jealousy" (Acts 5:17.) Pilate knew that Jesus had been brought before him out of envy from the Jews (Matt. 27:18.) In each of these cases, envy and jealousy worked together to deprive someone of their blessings. But this is not the character of God.

Perhaps a marriage illustration can illustrate the difference. No man with any moral compass at all wants to share his wife with another man. He expects her complete devotion to him. If a husband is jealous and angry just because his wife talks to another man, that would be selfish possessiveness. But if a husband saw another man trying to steal his wife's affections and thus steal her away from him, then that husband has reason to be righteously jealous.

God is jealous of His holy name. No other gods were to be constructed because God is a jealous God (Ex. 20:4-5.) God Himself said, "I am the Lord; that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols." (Isaiah 42:8.) God is the sovereign creator and cannot give His holy name to another. If He did, He would be sharing His glory and He can't do that. Nor should we want Him to. And God is also jealous for our best interests. We are married to God and He doesn't want others to threaten that relationship. In Nahum, Nineveh had long been mistreating God's people and now their sins were full. God acted for Israel's benefit to remove a threat. I am glad God is jealous.