

A Jealous God
Exodus 20:3–6
September 6, 2026

Years back, Mark Dever told a story about a class he attended focused on the character of God. In that class, Mark made a statement about God, a statement to which a man named Bill responded. Bill said, “politely but firmly” that he liked to think of God rather differently. Then for several minutes he described what he meant. That is, he liked to think of God as “being wise, but not meddling; compassionate, but never overpowering; ever so resourceful, but never interrupting.” After some time, Bill concluded his thoughts by saying, “This is how I like to think of God.” Now, if you’ve ever been around Mark, you’re probably not *too* surprised by how he responded. He said this: “Thank you, Bill, for telling us so much about *yourself*, but we are concerned to know what *God* is like.”¹

Why bring that story up today? First, because of the ever-present danger of making God in *our* image, considering Him in categories or with characteristics that are merely our own construction. Secondly, I bring this up because of how vital it is that we conceive of God as the Scriptures reveal Him. A. W. Tozer’s quote is as important as it ever was: “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”²

Thirdly, I bring up that Dever anecdote because of our text today. Where the Law of God will reveal God’s nature and character to us.³ How do we know the Law does that? Because God tells us that it does. He reveals to us that His commands actually *proceed* from—and *align* with—His character.

And He tells us that, clearly, in the second commandment. A commandment that details something about God that “Bill” might not agree with. It’s also something we might not spend a lot of time thinking about.

1. A Jealous God (vv. 3–6)

We’ll get to the command in a moment, but I want to begin with the statement in our text that God makes about Himself. And I want to begin there to reinforce some of what we talked about Wednesday night from Sinclair Ferguson’s book.⁴ That is, surrounding the imperatives of the Bible—and *greatly* outnumbering them—are indicative statements that ground those imperatives. We’d even say those statements—statements of reality, of what is true—serve as fuel to help us obey what the Bible commands.

That indicative/imperative reality is in verse 5. The LORD God has given the first two commands. Having done so, He *then* uses the word “for” to serve as one of the reasons He gives the command. It’s toward the middle of verse 5: **For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God.**

Maybe that description *still* surprises us. J. I. Packer writes this: “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.”⁵ If I might add to that quote, not Bill—and not *us*.

¹ See Mark Dever, *9 Marks of Healthy Church*, 57.

² A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, 7.

³ See Kevin DeYoung, “The law is an expression of the Lawgiver’s heart and character,” in *The 10 Commandments*, 22.

⁴ Sinclair Ferguson, *Devoted to God*.

⁵ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 151.

Some of this is because the word “jealous” has connotations in our language that the original word wouldn’t have had.⁶ But it’s also because an attribute attached to someone who is holy is *entirely* different than that attribute being attached to someone who is *not*. To say that God is jealous is *not* to say that He is like us when *we* are jealous. Or as Packer writes, “God’s jealousy is not a compound of frustration, envy, and spite, . . . but appears instead as a praiseworthy zeal to preserve something supremely precious.”⁷ If it helps to substitute a “z” for the “j,” *zealous* is a good companion word to fill out what God’s describing here.⁸

Again, we let the Bible tell us who God is. And we let the Bible define terms for us. If He’s jealous, it means—in part—He has a certain zeal to protect His own honor.⁹ Throughout the prophets, the zeal of the LORD of hosts details what God will do for His own glory (Is. 9:7; 37:32). For example, Isaiah 42:8 reads: **I am the LORD, that is My name; I will not give My glory to another, nor My praise to graven images.**

He’s jealous—zealous—for His own glory. And yes, that would be a strange declaration if God were *not* who He is. John Piper helps us so much in thinking through this reality. From one side, maybe the negative side, he’s written about what it would mean if God *wasn’t* committed to His own glory, saying this: “God would be *unrighteous* if He valued anything more than what is supremely valuable.”¹⁰ And then, positively, in terms of what it means for *us*, he’s also said things like this: in pursuing His own glory, He actually upholds the *one* thing in the universe that will satisfy our souls forever.

In other words, it’s because *His* honor is what’s supremely valuable that He’s zealous *for* it. And it’s because His honor is also His people’s highest good that He is jealous *for them*.

Again, His jealousy—unlike ours—is the infallibly righteous kind. It is a zeal to protect those He’s in covenant with. To be jealous *for* them means that He is, first, committed to their well-being. And if *that’s* so, it’s *also* true that He is angered by anything that might endanger them.¹¹ We know, even in our sinful state, a kind of affection that rightly transforms into fervor or zeal when a threat to that relationship looms.¹²

When the LORD calls Himself jealous, it’s *far* from a character flaw.

By the way, this isn’t *merely* an Old Testament notion. In the book of James we read this: **Or do you think that the Scripture speaks to no purpose: “He jealously desires the Spirit which He has made to dwell in us”?** (James 4:5). Of course, in that New Testament epistle, James argues that God’s desire—His jealous desire—is for whole-hearted allegiance from us. In fact, He opposes everything that would divide our affections.¹³

What does this passage tell us about who God is? It tells us quite clearly—because He says it explicitly—that He is a jealous God.

⁶ Desmond Alexander, *Exodus*, AOTC, 405.

⁷ Packer, 153.

⁸ Alexander, 405.

⁹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 205.

¹⁰ John Piper, *Desiring God*, 42.

¹¹ Alexander, 405.

¹² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Vol. 1, 385, writes this: “The Lord, who has wedded us to Himself in truth, manifests the most burning jealousy whenever we, neglecting the purity of His holy marriage, become polluted with wicked lusts.”

¹³ Robert Plummer, *ESV Expository Commentary*, 269.

2. A Jealous God and other “gods” (vv. 3–5)

With that aspect of God’s character more clearly in mind, do the first two commands not make *complete* sense? Of course He says, first, **You shall have no other gods before Me**. It’s not only because there is no other god in existence. It’s not *only* that every other quote “god”—both then and now—are false deities. It’s also that to bow before that figment of our imagination is to dishonor the one true and jealous God.

But also, it is to tell ourselves a lie—a destructive one—a lie those who’d lived in Egypt for generations were susceptible to. I found so helpful Doug Stuart’s reasons for why idolatry was so attractive and prevalent in ancient cultures. First, he writes that idolatry was sold with a guarantee. This or that statue was understood to become a *certain* conduit for anything done or prayed in its presence. And that, of course, appeals to humanity’s self-absorption. If one should serve the gods, the god was obligated to serve in return, in “quid pro quo” fashion. Furthermore, idolatry was easy, that is, other than a sacrifice here and there, it required little in terms of ethical behavior. In fact, with shrines everywhere, idolatry was not only easy, but convenient. By the way, it was also what everyone else did around you. The cultural milieu made it appear logical. Surely there needed to be a Poseidon of the sea, an Aphrodite of love, and an Athena of wisdom. And just to move things along, there are more *base* reasons why idolatry was so attractive. Because temples of those gods were often pleasing to the senses and indulgent.¹⁴

In short, idolatry was, and *is*, attractive to fallen humanity. It always *has* been. Idolatry has *never* been some fringe practice. And it was a system of living common to those the Hebrews were around.

However, it was a system built on a lie. We might consider the scene in Athens from Acts 17. Again, these idolatrous societies had deities for every possible scenario and circumstance. Or at least they *hoped* so. However, as you *likely* recall, in Athens there was an altar without a name on it. Why? Because of a lingering unease that some unnamed god had been overlooked; and therefore, unappealed.¹⁵ That’s the origin of the altar to the “unknown God.”

So, in that religious system, to the pagans enslaved by it, Paul says this, in essence: “That altar is right. There *is* a God unknown to you. Of course He isn’t made by *you*, using some stone or lifeless wood. *He* made the world and everything in it. He’s *not* like these gods you manipulate. He does not even dwell in temples made with hands. Furthermore, He doesn’t need *you* to sustain Him. He’s the One who gives every one of you life (Acts 17:23–25). In a context of idolatry, Paul proclaims the one true God.

In many ways, that’s what’s happening *here* as well. Surrounded by idolatry, having grown up around it, Yahweh tells the Hebrews it’s all a lie. These false gods do nothing but make false promises. Knowing what threatens His people, knowing what attempts to divide their allegiance, He declares: “There is no other.” Having rescued the Hebrews from slavery, He continues to deliver them from Egypt.

In light of who He is, the first command makes absolute sense. The second command shouldn’t surprise us either. Not only is it “no other gods,” the people of God are also commanded not to entertain a *lesser* version of Him. That’s verse 4: **You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth**. Again, though images were central to the religious practices of those around them, the Hebrews were *not* to make an idol—or a graven image.¹⁶

¹⁴ See Doug Stuart, *Exodus*, NAC, 450–453.

¹⁵ Dennis Johnson, *Let’s Study Acts*, 220.

¹⁶ Alexander, 402.

We might ask, “Does *this* refer to an image of Yahweh *or* to the other lower-case gods just warned against?” It seems reasonable to say it covers *both* possibilities. One might ask, “Could the Hebrews have *attempted* to make an image of what they’d seen at Sinai when God descended?” Yes, they *could* have. But a better question would be to ask: “Had the Hebrews *seen* God?” And the answer would be, unequivocally, “No, they had not.” Keep in mind that when He descended, He did so within a cloud. That was on purpose. His truest form—His *essence* we might say—was concealed.¹⁷ Deuteronomy 4 says it as clearly as it can be said: **you did not see any form on the day the LORD spoke to you at Horeb from the midst of the fire** (Deut. 4:15).

So, yes, they could attempt to make a graven image based on what they’d seen. But they actually hadn’t *seen*. That means that any attempt to portray it would be to claim to know something that God Himself hid.¹⁸ Further, no *matter* the skill of the artist, it would most certainly *not* be an accurate representation of Yahweh. And therefore, it would also be the essence of idolatry. That’s what verse 5 both implies *and* prohibits: **You shall not worship them or serve them.**

By the way, the repetitive language in verse 4—**in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth**—serves to underscore the point that there can be no exceptions to this ban.¹⁹

God forbids idolatry. And therefore, He forbids the making of an image, to worship or serve it. Why? I hope this clause in verse 5 makes even *more* sense now: **for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God.**

God cares about *who* we worship; and He cares about *how* we worship Him. In fact, He determines *how* we’re to think about Him. Bill doesn’t *get* to describe God however he’d like. We don’t get to construct our own versions of who God is. What He’s revealed we’re to believe. What He’s *not* revealed, we’re *not* to make up.

Which means we’re to be careful what influences our conceptions of Him. We’re to be careful—*vigilant* even—to avoid thoughts that do not represent Him rightly. We need to be thoughtful and discerning in terms of what we’ve *chosen* to read and see. C. S. Lewis wrote, “Images of the Holy easily become holy images.” Then he goes on to say, but “. . . my idea of God is not a divine idea. It has to be shattered time after time. He shatters it Himself.”²⁰

And He shatters it in order to facilitate true worship. He aims that we worship *Him* alone—not Yahweh—plus. And that aim of His *also* forbids any false—or lesser—notions concerning Him. He’s a jealous God.

3. A Jealous God and His people (vv. 5-6)

The character of God—who He is—helps us understand what He commands. But also, who He is helps us grasp what He does.

Verse 5 goes on: **for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate me.** Maybe we should begin with those last few words in order to re-emphasize that idolatry is far from neutral. Those that engage in it, those that worship *other* gods, Yahweh describes as **those who hate me**. In short, there is no such thing as spiritual indifference. You either bow before the God of creation or you bow before something else.

¹⁷ Alexander, 403.

¹⁸ Alexander, 403-404.

¹⁹ Stuart, 450.

²⁰ C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, chapter 4.

Further, verse 5 calls idolatry **iniquity**. It's hatred of God; and it's sin. And it's a sin so serious that God speaks of it in terms of influence and duration, that this is the kind of sin that affects generations. He—a jealous God—is a God **visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate me**.

Now, to quickly address the misunderstanding of this verse, it does *not* mean that innocent children receive the punishment due their sinful fathers. That's *not* what it means here in Exodus 20, nor what it means later in Exodus 34. We interpret Scripture by other Scripture. Deuteronomy 24:16 says fathers are not punished for the sins of their sons, nor sons for the sins of their fathers. Furthermore, both Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 18 indicate that those exiles suffered for their *own* sins.²¹

So, if it doesn't mean *that*, what *does* it mean? It speaks to how seriously God takes idolatry because of its ability to corrupt generations to come.²² To be clear, God *can*, has, and *does* deliver from the most pagan of homes. But if mom and dad worship something other than the one true God, *generally* speaking, that will rub off on their children. And should children continue in the sins of their parents, they too will receive the same punishment as their parents.²³

To bow before another is iniquity. It is to hate God. *And* it is to teach others to hate as well. And that's something a jealous God does not overlook. It's a warning, to the third and the fourth generation.

However, that language—to the third and the fourth—is *also* mentioned as something of a contrast. In fact, some have written that this is the greatest numerical contrast in the Bible.²⁴ It's three or four on one hand. It's a *thousand* on the other. And the idea is not *merely* to a thousand, but to a thousand generations.²⁵ With that number in mind, that span of years, what is it that this jealous God aims to do? Hear the contrast in verse 6: **but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments**.

This jealous God *loves*. We could even say that His jealousy *arises* out of His covenant love for a people.²⁶ The word for lovingkindness here—*hesed*, often translated “steadfast love”—captures it. And yes, it *seems* as if we talk about this word every other week. Maybe it's because God's people just couldn't get over it, and just kept on writing songs about it. The word is all over the Psalms. Because here—in the Exodus revealed—was a love that was loyal, based on a covenant marked by commitment, given by One who'd demonstrated it, who'd *shown* it.

He was jealous for His honor; and He was jealous for His people. Not afflicted with the error of our human envy—our sinful pettiness. Instead, loving a people flawlessly, He intends to protect them from lesser things, and show them what is of highest value—His steadfast love for them.

Conclusion

And He intends to show it to a thousand generations. Which is something He says He'll do to those who *love* Him and *keep* His commandments.

I trust you sense the dilemma. The Hebrews did *not* keep those commandments. And neither would anyone else, no *other* subset of humanity, had *they* been given the chance. And so, we might ask: How will He—the God who does not change—uphold His character? How will He—the God

²¹ See Jeffery Leonard, *Exodus 15:22–40:33*, 153.

²² Stuart, 449.

²³ Stuart, 454.

²⁴ Stuart, 454.

²⁵ Leonard, 154.

²⁶ Alexander, 405.

who cannot lie—both visit iniquity on those who hate Him *and* show lovingkindness to thousands of generations?

He sends the *image* of the invisible God (Col. 1:15). Not a *lesser* version of Himself, but the radiance of His glory, the exact representation of His nature (Heb. 1). To look upon *Him* was to see the One unseen at Sinai.²⁷

And He—the *exact* image of God—kept the commands in our place. He fulfilled the Law for us. And then, by taking upon Himself the punishment we earned, shows lovingkindness to thousands of generations.

Who God *is*—His character—not *only* determines what He commands, it *also* explains what He's done. The invisible God, jealous for His own, put on flesh. Or as John would later write: **the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has seen God; God the only Son, who is at the Father's side, He has made Him known** (John 1:17-18).

Maybe your construction of God says He'd *never* come for someone like you. Be delivered from that false god. The one true God was *so* jealous for His people that He sent His Son for them.

²⁷ DeYoung, 50.