

Queries & Controversies

Q: *“In marriage, is jealousy always wrong?”*

A: In Old Testament times, a “law of jealousy” (Num. 5:29) applied to certain marital situations. Numbers 5:30 describes one of them as “when feelings of jealousy come over a man because he suspects his wife” of being unfaithful to him. The passage in Numbers describes the procedure the man is to follow. He is to take his wife to a priest, together with an offering of barley flour on her behalf (Num. 5:15). The offering is specifically “a grain offering for jealousy” (Num. 5:15). Then the priest himself performs a ritual to determine if the wife is indeed guilty. He writes curses on a scroll and washes them into bitter water. Then he burns some of the grain offering on the altar, and has the woman drink the bitter water. If the woman is guilty, the water causes bitter suffering (v. 23-27).

To our ears, there’s something quite foreign about this procedure. What husband would expose his wife to this kind of humiliation? And why doesn’t the wife have an opportunity to expose the husband as well to such a humiliating ritual? When I read the Old Testament, it’s apparent to me that the husband is usually more apt to be guilty of unfaithfulness. Yet, there is no corresponding opportunity for the wife to expose her husband as he exposes her. Why? It certainly offends our “politically correct” ears, doesn’t it? This ritual: holy water mixed with dust from the tabernacle floor! Then all the curses of the law are ceremoniously washed off into the water so that when the woman drinks it, she drinks all those curses. What’s with that? It sounds more like the Salem witch trials than it does anything we are accustomed to hearing from the Word of God. It has a magical tint to it. What do we

do with this passage in Numbers 5?

Maybe we should ask a different set of questions instead. What is there about this ritual that both we who live today and Israelites who lived 4,500 years ago can identify with? What about this narrative would not sound strange either to us or to them? Parts of the ritual sound strange to us

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that would not sound strange to them. This ritual, and similar kinds of rituals (trials by ordeal), were very common in the Middle East in those days. But what would neither of us find strange? The answer is—*jealousy*. We understand jealousy, and they understand jealousy. The text tells us that this is the law about jealousy (v. 29). God wants us to learn something about jealousy. There is a place for jealousy in marriage! But what factors make jealousy either right or wrong?

The first thing God wants us to see is that God is jealous about your marriage, and He wants *you* to be jealous about your marriage. But the sort of jealousy that couples are to cultivate is of a certain kind. God tells us in 1 Corinthians 6:9 that the fornicator and the adulterer will have no part in the kingdom of heaven. John tells us that the adulterer will be excluded from the city of God (Rev. 21:8). The writer of Hebrews tells us that marriage should be held in honor by all, and the marriage bed undefiled, for God will judge the fornicator and the adulterer (Heb. 13:4). You should jealously long for and guard the purity of your marriage, and be troubled by any threat to your oneness.

Sometimes our jealousies tend to be petty and selfish. For example, I get jealous

if my wife grabs the remote before I do. The remote belongs in one place—next to my chair! If she gets into the living room first and claims the remote, I cannot enjoy watching T.V. I keep hoping she'll leave the room for something to eat so I can put the remote back where it belongs! Some of you can identify with that, can't you? It puzzles me why women think the remote can go anyplace they want it to go.

Sometimes I get jealous of our dog. I like our dog—he's the only animal around that I like. He's a male German Shepherd—the only other male in our house. But sometimes I get jealous of him. We'll come home from being out. We walk in the door. The dog goes up to my wife, wags his tail, pants, and rubs up against her. My wife rubs him and says, "Ohhh, whose doggie are you? Mommy loves her doggie! What a good little doggie!" She gushes all over him! What about me? Why don't I get some of that gush? If I come to her and try the same thing, it doesn't work! Our jealousies can get petty. You probably have some petty jealousies, too.

Sometimes our jealousies can be powerfully destructive. I know a man who suspects his wife has been unfaithful and has good reason to suspect it. But he has responded by shutting down, no longer putting effort into the marriage. When I ask him about it, he says, "What about my pride? What kind of a man must I be if my wife would even *think* about another man! My pride has been hurt. I can't do anything about it." That kind of jealousy is very selfish, destroying him as well as the marriage.

Our jealousies can be petty and destructive, but God still wants us to have the right kind of jealousy about our marriages. He wants us to put energy and effort into our marriages. If you change the "j" in the word "jealous" to a "z," He wants us to be *zealous* for our marriages. (In the Bible, jealous and zealous are the same word.) Jealousy can be the purest sign of love. Maybe we could put a different spin on this man in Numbers 5. Maybe he doesn't want to embarrass or humiliate his wife, but he desperately loves his wife and knows that there are rumors spreading throughout the camp. He knows those rumors aren't true. He trusts his wife, and he wants to vindicate her and show the entire congregation that she is a noble woman. So he brings her to the ritual, not to humiliate her, but to exalt her and to demonstrate her faithfulness. You see, jealousy can be a sign of love.

Let me give you an example. We have horses, and every six weeks to two months a farrier has to come and put shoes on them. Our farrier's name is Bob. Bob is a guy who is built with very broad shoulders and a narrow waist. You think of an ice cream cone when you think of Bob's upper body. His legs are like oak trees.

He has black bushy hair. When he comes in the summer to shoe the horses, he wears a leather apron, and his muscles glisten with sweat in the sun. I hate Bob! So my wife and I are having breakfast, and I say, "Honey, what are you doing today?" She says, "The horses are going to be shod." I say, "Oh, Bob is coming, isn't he?" She kind of smiles. Let me ask you. What kind of husband wouldn't be jealous of Bob? I ought to be con-

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cerned about that, not because I really think my wife is going to do something inappropriate, but because I'm concerned about the marriage. The fact that I am jealous really says to her, "I care! I'm concerned. I love you." Jealousy can be a magnificent sign of your love.

Because I do marriage counseling, people often ask me to identify the biggest threat to marriages. Usually when they ask that question, they're thinking about something in our culture or society that impacts marriage. For example, they want to know if feminism has a real impact on marriage. Does the fact that both spouses work outside the home have an impact on marriage? What about the relativism of post-modernism? Of course, all of these do have an impact. But in my experience they are not the greatest dangers. Rather, the biggest threat to marriage is *indifference*. Indifference occurs when you start taking your husband or wife for granted. You no longer put effort into your marriage. You stop thinking of ways to show your love. You stop listening with the intent of getting into the soul and heart of your partner. You stop praying earnestly for your marriage. You're in trouble when you have stopped being jealous.

There are false lovers out there! They might not be another man or another woman. They could be your job, your interests or hobbies, your friends or your own comfort. When you start being indifferent about your marriage, those false lovers will turn your head and heart, and you yourself will stand with the woman in Numbers 5. That cup of bitter water will be placed in your hands, and the judgment of God will fall upon you. God wants *you* to be jealous for your marriage, because *He* is.

Yahweh, Jehovah, the God of Israel is the husband

that our Numbers 5 text is ultimately talking about. Israel is about to begin the wilderness journey. The tabernacle instruction has been given. The order of march has been set. They are on their way to the promised land. God reminds them: "Remember whose bride you are. Remember who your husband is. I am your husband. And don't forget I am not an indifferent husband. I am *jealous* for your love." *God is jealous.* Again and again in the Bible we read of the jealousy of God. When the commandments are given, God says, "Remember, I, the Lord your God, am a *jealous* God." In Exodus 34, the covenant was renewed because Israel had broken the first covenant by worshiping the golden calf. The tablets of law are rewritten, and the Lord says, "For the Lord, whose name is jealous, is a jealous God." Not only is He a jealous God, but His *name* is jealous. In Ezekiel 39:25, God says, "I shall be *jealous* for my holy name." Do you see the pattern? First, God says, "I am a jealous God. I am so jealous that my name is jealous." Then He says, "I am jealous for my name, which is jealous, which is a sign of my jealousy." God is a jealous God! Isaiah writes, "I am the Lord; that is my name! I will not give my glory to another" (42:8). God won't *share* His love. He won't *share* His glory.

Several years ago my daughter started showing her horse. In the very first show that my daughter entered, she won the blue ribbon. In our community the local weekend sports are reported in the following Thursday's paper. I couldn't wait for that paper to come out! As soon as the paper was delivered, I opened up the sports page and looked at the local sports news. I spotted the list of winners. But I saw they made two mistakes. First, they misspelled her name. They put Jessica Dettler, not Bettler. Second, they had her coming in second, not first! I called the editor and said, "You *will* print a correction!" He said, "You've got to be crazy! Did you see how many names are listed there in small print? Nobody cares!" I said, "I care! That's my name!" Well, that's what God says about Himself. He cares about His name, and He *will* not share His glory with another. He *will* not accept coming in second!

A lot of things compete with God's name, but God never blesses the competition. He is jealous for His name. And He wants *you* to be jealous for His name. Are you? He wants your counselees to be jealous for His name. Are they? Is there just one passion that controls you? That controls them? What gives direction to all of your life, your thoughts, your decisions, and your will? Is that one passion, that one driving force, that one point, the glory of your God? If not, then you will stand with this woman, and that cup of bitter water will be put in your hands. The curse, the judgment of God, will fall upon you. God wants you to be jealous for His name. He wants you to be jealous for your marriage.

Can you imagine the terror this woman experiences as she stands there with that cup of water in her hands? Perhaps she is guilty, and she knows it. As she brings the cup closer and closer to her lips, she knows that as soon as the water touches her mouth, the curse will be manifested in front of the whole congregation. That curse, the judgment of God, will fall upon her. Can you see her hands tremble as she brings the cup closer and closer to her lips?

But those were Old Testament times. In these New Testament times, something else happens. Just as the water almost touches her lips, there is a stir in the crowd. Her husband rushes forward and snatches the cup of bitter water out of her hand. He raises it to his own mouth and drinks it to the very dregs. In this way the curse falls upon him and not on his beloved wife.

Husband and wife, counselor and counselee: we are each the bride of Christ. Christ, our husband, has taken the cup out of our hands. He has done this for us, and He says now, "Be jealous for My love, and show it by being jealous for your marriage."

There is a place for jealousy in marriage. But it has to be the kind of jealousy God has for us: for our good, wanting our relationship with Him to be pure and unblemished. It is to the glory of His name that we aim to love Him and each other with a jealous love.

by John F. Bettler