

Ps 99:1,2
Ps 79:2,3
Hy 12:5,6,7
Hy 12:12,13,14
Ps 106:18,19,22,23
Ezekiel 4,5
Ezekiel 5:13b

Yarrow, April 3, 2011

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

From heaven on high the Almighty Creator reached down to sinners on earth and established His covenant of grace – a covenant He established even with *us*. So we know ourselves rich; we're children of God Almighty, for Jesus' sake forgiven of our sins, even temples of the Holy Spirit. *Rich*.

Who, my brothers and sisters, is this God that established His covenant with you? The fact that He made His covenant with us leads us to conclude: this God is *love*, this God is *mercy*. And so it is, beloved. That He gave His only Son to reconcile us to Him is love in the deepest sense of the word, says the apostle John (1 John 4).

The question is, though, whether this is all there is to say about your God. Or has He revealed more about Himself? Indeed, beloved, the God who established His covenant with us has revealed more about Himself than His love and His mercy. This God is also jealous, perfectly jealous. That's to say: this God loves the children of His choosing so deeply that He is very possessive of them – and therefore does not tolerate it when His people do not return His love with a lifestyle of obedience. That's the message that God drives home to us in the passage of Scripture before us today. The God of the covenant would impress on the exiles that He is a jealous God – and spells that out to His people-in-exile so that they might learn to know their God-by-covenant better. Inasmuch as God has put this material in our Bibles for our edification, this is a lesson we need to learn also.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

EZEKIEL SHOWS THE EXILES THAT THEIR GOD IS JEALOUS.

1. What is God's jealousy?
2. How does God display His jealousy?
3. To whom did God display His jealousy?

1. What is God's jealousy?

In my theme for this morning's sermon, brothers and sisters, I described God as 'jealous'. That word does not appear in our translation of our text. Instead, our text says that the LORD has spoken "in My zeal." Literally, however, the LORD says here that He has spoken "in My jealousy." Then again, in English there is but little difference between being jealous and being zealous; zealousness is the action that demonstrates jealousy.

What, brothers and sisters, is jealousy? In the course of our lives we've all come across jealousy, and we've learned to see it as an evil, a monster. We see jealousy as a compound of frustrated covetousness, of envy and spite. Jealousy, we experience, comes from the attitude of 'I want what you've got,' and so leads to hatred, leads to anger – and pity the home where

attitudes of jealousy are permitted to exist. Jealousy is potent, obsessive; jealousy destroys relationships. The wise man of Proverbs 27 puts it like this: “Wrath is cruel and anger a torrent, But who is able to stand before jealousy?” (vs 4). In truth, jealousy is a monster....

Yet the LORD has revealed Himself in the Bible as jealous. We hear it every Sunday again in the second commandment: “I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God” (Exodus 20:5). You recall too that when Israel made the golden calf at Mt Sinai the Lord responded by saying that His name is ‘Jealous’ – Exodus 34:14. His Name: that’s His character, His nature. His name is ‘Jealous’, and that’s to say that the term ‘jealous’ captures something of the depths of God’s true identity.¹ We find it hard to comprehend: does God fall victim to that monster called jealousy, that cancer that eats at one’s soul? We’re sure: that can’t be....

So we wonder: what is the nature of this divine jealousy? What is Ezekiel talking about when he speaks in our text about God’s jealousy, and sets the term jealousy in the context of God’s anger and fury? What is this jealousy?!

To help us understand the concept, brothers and sisters, we need to remember that there are two sorts of jealousy among men. The one is the monster I’ve described earlier, and it is indeed an evil. But the other form of jealousy is a noble thing. Think of a marriage relation. When a third party finds a place in the heart of your spouse, you have every right to be jealous; in fact, we’d find fault with the person who was not jealous in such a situation, we’d wonder as to the depth of your love for the spouse to begin with. Scripture too upholds the reaction of jealousy as noble and pleasing to the Lord; think of the jealousy offerings of Numbers 5, offerings set in the context of one spouse doubting whether the other was faithful to him (cf Proverbs 6:34f).

Well now, Scripture consistently views God’s jealousy as being of this second kind. In other words, *His jealousy is an aspect of His love for His people*. God in love has bound Himself by covenant to a particular people, but when that people spurn Him in favour of serving other gods His jealousy is roused – simply because He loves this people so much and wants them to enjoy the full benefits and pleasures of His covenant with them. That is: God has promised to give His Son to redeem the people of His love, and so demands of them their utter and absolute loyalty. Calvin hit the nail on the head when He said this of God’s jealousy:

“...the Lord, who has wedded us to himself in truth [cf. Hosea 2:19-20], manifests the most burning jealousy whenever we, neglecting the purity of his holy marriage, become polluted with wicked lusts.”²

And that’s precisely the situation in which the exiles of Ezekiel’s day found themselves. Chap 5:6: Jerusalem “has rebelled against My judgments,” says God. That spiritual adultery on Israel’s part has provoked God’s jealousy. In our text God speaks of Himself as “I, the LORD,” and the point is that He is the God of the covenant. But Israel has jilted her Lover, and so God is jealous, and that’s why God has said all He’s said in the two chapters we’ve just read. That brings us to our second point:

2. How God displays His jealousy.

What, then, did God say in these two chapters? How did He reveal His jealousy?

¹ Packer, *Knowing God* (London: Houghton & Stoughton, 1973), pg 187, gives a lengthy list of passages where the Lord is described with the word ‘jealous’.

² Institutes, II, 8, 18.

The two chapters we read form a unit. Chap 4 and the first four verses of chap 5 portray Ezekiel, upon God's command, as a street actor – showing the people through pantomime what provoking the jealousy of the covenant God leads to. Chap 5:5-17 provides God's explanation of the things He commanded Ezekiel as street actor to do.

God tells Ezekiel first to take a clay tile and draw on it a picture of Jerusalem. The exiles invariably understand that the clay tile represents their favoured city. Then Ezekiel must "lay siege against it" (4:2). That is, around the clay tile (Jerusalem) he must construct the bits and pieces that an enemy army would build when they attack a city. The exiles in Babylon are to understand that Jerusalem is under siege.

Before I go further, I need to tell you what the people of Israel of Ezekiel's day thought about Jerusalem. The people had learned from the Scripture they had that Jerusalem was the city of God's choosing. This was the city David had captured to be capital of his kingdom, and so the city where the Ark of the Covenant finally found a resting place. This is where Solomon built a temple for God, and where the cloud of God's glory had settled after Solomon opened the temple (I Kings 8:11). This, obviously, was God's city. To the minds of the people it followed that Jerusalem could not be destroyed, and certainly not the temple. Connected directly with this sense that Jerusalem was unassailable was the notion that Israel as God's people were always safe with God. God had made His covenant with them, was it not? And God keeps His covenant.... There was with Israel what's called a 'covenant automatism'; we are God's covenant people, God's dwelling place is in our midst (in the temple of Jerusalem), and so no disaster can ruin us. We understand: given that line of thinking, the fact that Ezekiel must portray Jerusalem as besieged invariably had to raise questions in the minds of the prophet's observers.

With that in mind, we go back to our chapter. Jerusalem, then, is besieged. Our thoughts go to Nebuchadnezzar; it's he, we say, who will besiege Jerusalem. But that's seeing it too superficially. It's true: Nebuchadnezzar will besiege the city in a few years' time. But Nebuchadnezzar is nothing else, congregation, than a tool in God's hands (cf Is 10:5ff). Ezekiel's point is that God Himself has besieged His city! Vs 3 speaks of an iron plate that's to function as a wall between the clay tile and the prophet, between Jerusalem and the God behind the prophet. That is: there is a wall of sin between the people and God, and the existence of that wall must have consequences. God explains the problem in chap 5:5-8: Jerusalem was indeed precious to God, so much so that God "set her in the midst of the nations and the countries all around her" (vs 5); Jerusalem was God's jewel in the middle of the world. But –vs 6– "she rebelled against My judgments by doing wickedness more than the nations...." Therefore, says God in vs 8, "Indeed I, even I, am against you." Israel thought in terms of: the LORD is our covenant God, we are His people, so God is with us – Immanuel. God says: No! I *was* with you, true, for you were special to me, and I made My Home in your midst in the temple of Jerusalem. But, says God, it's not so anymore; I am not *with* you anymore, now I am *against* you. I will hear your prayers no more; the iron plate between My city and My prophet represents that wall of sin you placed between you and Me.

We hear this, congregation, and we realize: God's jealousy is well and truly provoked. To disown His people; that's not chickenfeed! As to what Israel's transgressions actually were, we'll come to more details on that in the coming chapters of Ezekiel's prophecy. For now we need to realize that the fact that God's jealousy is provoked does not represent a change in God at all. God didn't suddenly become jealous, as if there was no jealousy in Him before. Recall that when God first claimed Israel for Himself at Mt Sinai, the LORD told Israel straightaway that if His people

would turn their backs on Him in favour of serving other gods, He would pour out His covenant curses on His own (Lev 26) – such was the depth of His love for His bride, His people-by-covenant. Israel in the days of Ezekiel had the Bible, and they could know that God was more than only love devoid of any jealousy; He had told them not to take His covenant for granted. They had ignored His instruction, and so had to feel the jealousy of the offended Lover. “I am against you” – *ouch!*

Why, then, did God’s jealousy boil to the surface now? Was Israel doing something different today than they had done for so many years? No, beloved, Israel wasn’t. Ezekiel had to lie on his left side for 390 days – one day for each year of Israel’s transgression. That is: for 390 years Israel’s life has been characterized by iniquity. 390 years: from the date of this vision (c. 594) 390 years brings you back to the time when David (c. 1000-961) captured Jerusalem from the Jebusites and brought the ark of the covenant to Zion (594+390=987). But that whole time of Israel’s history since God claimed Jerusalem in that special way and made it His dwelling place has been characterized by rebellion and disobedience to God’s covenant stipulations; Israel had provoked God’s jealousy for centuries already! Why, then, did God’s jealousy not boil over any earlier? Vs 4: as Ezekiel lies on his left side, he has to “lay the iniquity of the house of Israel” on his side. That is: the sins of the people over these 390 years since the ark first came to Jerusalem must be laid upon Ezekiel. Recall: it was the task of the Old Testament priest to bear the iniquity of the people (cf Ex 28:38; Num 18:1), and the point here was that God did not deal with the people according to what they deserved because the priest bore –as it were– the people’s sins until Christ took those sins upon Himself. But now God’s jealousy is so provoked that the time of God overlooking the people’s sins (for Jesus’ sake) is past; things have deteriorated so far that the curses mentioned in the covenant must now be poured out; “I am against you,” says the Lord.

The point is driven home by the reference to Ezekiel lying also on his right side for 40 days – again, one day for every year of Judah’s iniquity. Forty years from the date of the vision takes one to the time when King Josiah (640-609) found the book of the law in the temple and set about restoring the service of God in Jerusalem (594+40=637); in his day the preaching of the gospel of grace was restored. That is: God in His love for His apostate people in Judah gave a king who understood the significance of being loved by such a God. So King Josiah sought to move the people to lives of obedience and thankfulness. But despite Josiah’s reforms, the people persisted in their rebellions – till the depths of God’s love revealed itself in the jealousy of our chapter. The sins of the people in the last forty years must be laid on Ezekiel’s right side (the priest will bear the sins of the *past*), but *now* God’s patience comes to an end. Hence the instruction to Ezekiel in 4:7: he must *bare his arm* as he sets his face toward the siege of Jerusalem. That is: *God’s* arm is bared, God is preparing for battle. God will contain His jealousy no longer; *He* besieges the city of Jerusalem, fights against His own dwelling place and the people of His covenant; “I, even I, am against you.”

Of course, one who thinks in terms of covenant automatism –we’re God’s people, God won’t reject us altogether; He’ll come around in time and show us mercy again– one who thinks in terms of covenant automatism will refuse to accept that this siege could go all the way to its bitter end. That’s why the LORD spells out for the exiles just how intense His jealousy is. It’s not just that God in jealous fury besieges the city of Jerusalem *for a short while*, and then gets over His jealousy. People may be like that; jealous one day, over it the next. Not God. Chap 4:9: Ezekiel must prepare bread from wheat, barley, beans, lentils, millet, and spelt (spelt being a variety of cheap wheat). The point is that Ezekiel must portray that there is not enough wheat in

the city to make bread, nor enough barley, etc; whatever one can find must be mixed together to make sufficient quantity to merit baking a loaf. Even then, Ezekiel has to content himself with starvation rations. Twenty shekels of bread per day equates to about 200 grams; that's about a third of a loaf of bread as one can buy them today. He could drink one-sixth of a hin of water per day; that's about 2/3 of a litre. In temperatures not unlike an Okanagan summer, that's precious little water. God have mercy on His people and break the siege? No, God's jealousy is nothing to laugh at! Chap 4:16: "Son of man, surely I will cut off the supply of bread in Jerusalem; they shall eat bread by weight and with anxiety, and shall drink water by measure and with dread...." And chap 5:10: such will be the hunger in the city that "fathers shall eat their sons in your midst, and sons shall eat their fathers..." – as God had prophesied in Leviticus 26 (vs 29).³

But surely, surely God would relent, remember His covenant, have mercy! No, says God, no! In His covenant love God's jealousy is too perfect for that! Chap 4:13: the children of Israel shall eat their defiled bread among the Gentiles. Israel's future is not deliverance; Israel's future is to be scattered among the nations and there be reduced to such sorry circumstances that they will prepare their bread using fuel made of human waste. How repulsive! "I, even I, am against you" – see there, congregation, the jealousy of the God of the covenant!

And even with that picture of the consequences of God's jealousy, brothers and sisters, the Lord is not content. What His jealousy means must be spelled out more graphically still. Chap 5:1: Ezekiel must shave his head and beard using a sharp sword, then divide the hair into three equal piles. One pile is to be burned, and that's to say –vs 12– that a third of the covenant people in the city shall die of pestilence and perish through the famine of the siege. A second pile of hair is to be struck with the sword, and that's to say –vs 12– that a third of the covenant people in the city will be killed by the sword; that's two thirds of the covenant people dead. The third pile Ezekiel is to scatter to the wind, and that's to say –vs 12– that the final third of the covenant people will be scattered in all directions – yet even then God's sword will hound them. What this is? Exactly because God's covenant relation with His people is *so special* will God in His jealousy *destroy* the people who despise His love. Vs 11: "My eye will not spare, nor will have any pity." In truth, "I, even I, am against you."

Then yes, in vs 3 Ezekiel is told to "take a small number of [hairs from the third pile, those for scattering] and bind them in the edge of [his] garment." That is: a remnant will survive. In the midst of all the horrors of these two chapters, this is a thought we want to cling to; here, finally, we find a ray of light, some comfort. That's fine, congregation, that we want a ray of hope, but I must draw to your attention that the Lord does not come back to these few hairs elsewhere in these two chapters. So we can't focus on the mercy we find in vs 3; the whole two chapters is about God's jealousy. And that jealousy means that God is not neutral to His people, nor does He wait some days for His fury to calm down; God's jealousy within the covenant means that God's tenderness and care for His people is *replaced* by fury and wrath. That warm, comforting language-of-the-covenant – "I am with you" – becomes hot, hard language-of-the-covenant – "I am against you." God's jealousy means that the warmth of God's love is replaced not by coldness-from-a-distance but by the heat of divine fury – and that heat is breathing down your neck! This, beloved, is the jealousy of God, His holy reaction when the love of God is spurned. Please, beloved of the Lord, see in that jealousy something of the intensity of God's *love* for His people-by-covenant! *He* feels so strongly about His people that He doesn't want them to go two-

³ So it happened. See Lam 4:16.

timing with another god. Such is His love that He wants His people all to Himself – as any husband worth his salt would demand.

We understand that this was a profound message for the exiles. They took God's covenant for granted, thought that His love for them in the covenant meant that God would always be there for them, always show them mercy. What God has Ezekiel do and say in these two chapters drives home to the exiles that their understanding of *who God is* was deficient. Who is God? Yes, He loves His people – *loves them so much that He cannot tolerate competition in His relation with His bride*. The people of Israel felt it in their stomachs; Jerusalem's siege through Nebuchadnezzar reduced the people to starvation and slavery. In fact, the temple was destroyed, the Holy of Holies where God dwelt included. The city was razed; nothing, *nothing* was left of the jewel God once set in the midst of the nations. To their hurt they tasted the intensity of God's love for them.

But for us, beloved, the message of chaps 4 & 5 is more profound than it ever was for the exiles. For we have seen more of the jealousy of God in the years since Ezekiel prophesied. All those sins of the Old Testament dispensation, including the iniquities Ezekiel had to bear for the 390 days and 40 days respectively, were finally laid on Jesus Christ. Indeed, our sins were laid on Him too. And what happened then? Such was God's jealousy in the face of the sins of His people that He poured forth upon His Son all the righteous anger and holy fury that a jealous Lover can produce. The weight of God's wrath against sin – *our sin!* – pressed out of Jesus the bloody sweat of the Garden of Gethsemane – we say in the Lord's Supper form. On the cross the heat of God's jealousy pressed out of Jesus' lips the anguished cry of desolation: "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?!" And the answer of God is this: "I, even I, am against you," says the Lord, because I hate sin, I hate it when My bride two-times with another lover. And Jesus felt to the depths of His soul the rejection spawned by that jealousy. Weighted by that burden He had to pay for sin – *and He did so!*

Shall we then, beloved, see God only as a God of soft love and mercy? It's so tempting, O yes, so tempting. And it's so modern too; in our day of marriage infidelity and shallow love, who wants to see God as jealous of His bride-by-covenant and therefore pouring out fury because His bride has cheated?! But after we've read Ezekiel 4 & 5, and after we've stood at the cross of Calvary, congregation, we dare not, we *dare not* see the love of God only in sweet and soft terms. We understand: His love for us is so deep, so intense, that any spurning of that love provokes a deep and fearful jealousy. It is as apostle wrote to the Hebrews: "our God is a consuming fire" (Heb 12:29). So He demands perfect obedience to the stipulations of His covenant; He insists that we serve Him with utter and absolute loyalty, He tolerates no spiritual cheating.

Now yet, briefly, our last point:

3. To whom did God display His jealousy?

Has it struck you, brothers and sisters, that the material of chaps 4 & 5, though it was *about* the people of Jerusalem, was not *spoken* to the people of Jerusalem? Though it's *about* Jerusalem, it's spoken to the exiles of Babylon – so many hundreds of kilometres removed from the place where the jealousy of Israel's jilted Lover was tasted so bitterly. That is: by seeing Ezekiel lying there for so many days beside his clay tablet eating the rations of a besieged city, and then cutting off his hair and getting rid of it so ruthlessly, these exiles of Babylon are told what God's jealousy means for the people left in Jerusalem; *this jealousy means their end!* But the exiles themselves *are spared this destruction*; from their midst one day the Christ will be born!

Why, then, are they told of God's fury against Jerusalem? For this reason, beloved: *God would teach **them** who He is!* These exiles are confronted with *who their covenant God is –jealous!–* so that they might serve the Lord with greater zeal – lest they themselves perish as their brethren did in Jerusalem. *See there God's care, God's love, for these exiles!*

We today are allowed to listen in on this instruction about God's jealousy. Is it attractive material? Our human sensitivities don't think so. But faith says: how wonderfully great is the love of God to us! Such is His love for *us in Yarrow* that He tells us of the depths of His love and therefore of His jealousy – tells us so that we might take Him seriously, serve Him ardently, love Him sincerely, *not assume that we're safe simply because we're in the covenant.*

God is with us –Immanuel– and so tells us of His jealousy. We shall not cheat on God in any way. His love is too profound for that.