

The Jealous God

by John Calvin (1509-1564)

Exodus 20:5

I. The Text Opened

A. Exodus 20:5

1. "I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me," (Exod. 20:5).
 - a) The meaning here is the same as if he had said, that our duty is to cleave to him alone (as in the first command).
 - b) To induce us to this, he proclaims his authority which he will not permit to be impaired or despised with impunity.
 - (1) *It is true, the word used is El, which means God; but as it is derived from a word meaning strength.*
 - c) Secondly, he calls himself jealous, because he cannot bear a partner.
 - d) Thirdly, he declares that he will vindicate his majesty and glory, if any transfer it either to the creatures or to graven images; and that not by a simple punishment of brief duration, but one extending to the third and fourth generation of such as imitate the impiety of their progenitors.
 - (1) *In the same manner, he declares his constant mercy and kindness to the remote posterity of those who love him, and keep his Law.*
 - (2) *The Lord very frequently addresses us in the character of a husband; the union by which he connects us with himself, when he receives us into the heart of the Church, having some resemblance to that of holy wedlock, because it is founded on mutual faith.*
 - (3) *As he performs all the offices of a true and faithful husband, so he stipulates love and conjugal chastity from us; that is, that we do not prostitute our souls to Satan, to be defiled with foul carnal lusts.*
 - e) So, when he rebukes the Jews for their apostasy, he complains that they have cast off chastity, and polluted themselves with adultery.
 - (1) *Therefore, as the purer and more chaste the husband is, the more grievously is he offended when he sees his wife inclining to a rival; so the Lord, who has betrothed us to himself in truth, declares that he burns with the hottest jealousy whenever, neglecting the purity of his holy marriage, we defile ourselves with abominable lusts, and especially when the worship of his Deity, which ought to have been most carefully kept unimpaired, is transferred to another, or adulterated with some superstition; since, in this way, we not only violate our fidelity, but defile the nuptial couch, by giving access to adulterers.*
2. In the threatening we must attend to what is meant when God declares that he will visit the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation.
 - a) It seems inconsistent with the equity of the divine procedure to punish the innocent for another's fault; and the Lord himself declares, that "the son shall not bear the iniquity of the father," (Ezek. 18:20).
 - b) But still we meet more than once with a declaration as to the postponing of the punishment of the sins of fathers to future generations.
 - c) In this way, Moses repeatedly addresses the Lord as "visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation," (Num. 14:18).

d) In like manner, Jeremiah, “Thou showest loving-kindness unto thousands, and recompenses the iniquity of the fathers into the bosom of their children after them,” (Jer. 32:18).

(1) Some feeling sadly perplexed how to solve this difficulty, think it is to be understood of temporal punishments only, which it is said sons may properly bear for the sins of their parents, because they are often inflicted for their own safety.

(2) This is indeed true; for Isaiah declared to Hezekiah, that his children should be stripped of the kingdom, and carried away into captivity, for a sin which he had committed (Isa. 39:7); and the households of Pharaoh and Abimelech were made to suffer for an injury done to Abraham (Gen. 12:17; 20:3-18).

(3) But the attempt to solve the question in this way is an evasion rather than a true interpretation.

(4) For the punishment denounced here and in similar passages is too great to be confined within the limits of the present life.

(5) We must therefore understand it to mean, that a curse from the Lord righteously falls not only on the head of the guilty individual, but also on all his lineage.

(6) When it has fallen, what can be anticipated but that the father, being deprived of the Spirit of God, will live most flagitiously; that the son, being in the same manner forsaken of the Lord, because of his father's iniquity, will follow the same road to destruction; and be followed in his turn by succeeding generations, forming a seed of evil-doers?

II. The Doctrine from the Text

A. Doctrine: God is jealous for his character against all evil doers.

1. First, let us examine whether such punishment is inconsistent with the divine justice.

a) If human nature is universally condemned, those on whom the Lord does not bestow the communication of his grace must be doomed to destruction; nevertheless, they perish by their own iniquity, not by unjust hatred on the part of God.

b) There is no room to expostulate, and ask why the grace of God does not forward their salvation as it does that of others.

c) Therefore, when God punishes the wicked for their crimes, by depriving their families of his grace for many generations, who will dare to bring a charge against him for this most righteous vengeance?

d) But it will be said, the Lord, on the contrary, declares, that the son shall not suffer for the father's sin (Ezek. 18:20).

(1) Observe the scope of that passage.

(2) The Israelites, after being subjected to a long period of uninterrupted calamities, had begun to say, as a proverb, that their fathers had eaten the sour grape, and thus set the children's teeth on edge; meaning that they, though in themselves righteous and innocent, were paying the penalty of sins committed by their parents, and this more from the implacable anger than the duly tempered severity of God.

(3) The prophet declares it was not so: that they were punished for their own wickedness; that it was not in accordance with the justice of God that a righteous son should suffer for the iniquity of a wicked father; and that nothing of the kind was exemplified in what they suffered.

(4) *For, if the visitation of which we now speak is accomplished when God withdraws from the children of the wicked the light of his truth and the other helps to salvation, the only way in which they are accursed for their fathers' wickedness is in being blinded and abandoned by God, and so left to walk in their parents' steps.*

(5) *The misery which they suffer in time, and the destruction to which they are finally doomed, are thus punishments inflicted by divine justice, not for the sins of others, but for their own iniquity.*

e) On the other hand, there is a promise of mercy to thousands—a promise which is frequently mentioned in Scripture, and forms an article in the solemn covenant made with the Church—I will be “a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee,” (Gen. 17:7).

(1) *With reference to this, Solomon says, “The just man walketh in his integrity: his children are blessed after him,” (Prov. 20:7); not only in consequence of a religious education (though this certainly is by no means unimportant), but in consequence of the blessing promised in the covenant, viz., that the divine favor will dwell forever in the families of the righteous.*

(2) *In this is excellent consolation to believers, and great ground of terror to the wicked; for if, after death, the mere remembrance of righteousness and iniquity have such an influence on the divine procedure, that his blessing rests on the posterity of the righteous, and his curse on the posterity of the wicked, much more must it rest on the heads of the individuals themselves.*

(3) *Notwithstanding of this, however, the offspring of the wicked sometimes amends, while that of believers degenerates; because the Almighty has not here laid down an inflexible rule which might derogate from his free election.*

(4) *For the consolation of the righteous, and the dismay of the sinner, it is enough that the threatening itself is not vain or nugatory, although it does not always take effect.*

(5) *For, as the temporal punishments inflicted on a few of the wicked are proofs of the divine wrath against sin, and of the future judgment that will ultimately overtake all sinners, though many escape with impunity even to the end of their lives, so, when the Lord gives one example of blessing a son for his father's sake, by visiting him in mercy and kindness, it is a proof of constant and unfailing favor to his worshipers.*

(6) *On the other hand, when, in any single instance, he visits the iniquity of the father on the son, he gives intimation of the judgment which awaits all the reprobate for their own iniquities.*

(7) *The certainty of this is the principal thing here taught.*

(a) *Moreover, the Lord, as it were by the way, commends the riches of his mercy by extending it to thousands, while he limits his vengeance to four generations.*

2. The knowledge of God does not consist in frigid speculation, but carries worship along with it; viz., how God is duly worshipped.

a) Now I will say, that whenever Scripture asserts the unity of God, it does not contend for a mere name, but also enjoins that nothing which belongs to Divinity be applied to any other; in this way making it obvious in what respect pure religion differs from superstition.

(1) *Right worship is a certain rule to be observed, in order that God might not be worshipped absurdly.*

- b) God, in vindicating his own right, first proclaims that he is a jealous God, and will be a stern avenger if he is confounded with any false god; and thereafter defines what due worship is, in order that the human race may be kept in obedience.
- c) Both of these he embraces in his Law when he first binds the faithful in allegiance to him as their only Lawgiver, and then prescribes a rule for worshipping him in accordance with his will.
- d) The Law, with its manifold uses and objects, is designed as a bridle to curb men, and prevent them from turning aside to spurious worship.
- e) Unless everything peculiar to divinity is confined to God alone, he is robbed of his honor, and his worship is violated.

III. The Text Applied

A. Worship of the Living God

1. It may be proper here more particularly to attend to the subtleties which superstition employs.
 - a) In revolting to strange gods, it avoids the appearance of abandoning the Supreme God, or
 - b) What belongs to God in worship is to be kept unimpaired. They give worship to God, and give service to the others.
 - c) When Paul reminds the Galatians of what they were before they came to the knowledge of God, he says that they “did service unto them which by nature are no gods,” (Gal. 4:8).
 - d) Because he does not say *latría*, was their superstition excusable?
 - (1) *This superstition, to which he gives the name of *dulia*, he condemns as much as if he had given it the name of *latría*.*
 - (2) *When Christ repels Satan’s insulting proposal with the words, “It is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve,” (Mt. 4:10), there was no question of *latría*.*
 - (3) *For all that Satan asked was *προσκύνησις* (respect).*
 - e) In the same manner when John is rebuked by the angel for falling on his knees before him (Rev. 19:10; 22:8, 9), we ought not to suppose that John had so far forgotten himself as to have intended to transfer the honor due to God alone to an angel.
 - (1) *But because it was impossible that a worship connected with religion should not savor somewhat of divine worship, he could not *προσκύνεῖν* (do obeisance to) the angel without derogating from the glory of God.*
 - (2) *True, we often read that men were worshipped; but that was, if I may so speak, civil honor.*
 - (3) *The case is different with religious honor, which, the moment it is conjoined with worship, carries profanation of the divine honor along with it.*
 - f) The same thing may be seen in the case of Cornelius (Acts 10:25).
 - (1) *He had not made so little progress in piety as not to confine supreme worship to God alone.*
 - (2) *Therefore, when he prostrates himself before Peter, he certainly does it not with the intention of adoring him instead of God.*
 - (3) *Yet Peter sternly forbids him.*

(4) And why, but just because men never distinguish so accurately between the worship of God and the creatures as not to transfer promiscuously to the creature that which belongs only to God.

(5) Therefore, if we would have one God, let us remember that we can never appropriate the minutest portion of his glory without retaining what is his due.

g) Accordingly, when Zechariah discourses concerning the repairing of the Church, he distinctly says not only that there would be one God, but also that he would have only one name—the reason being, that he might have nothing in common with idols.

(1) He has been pleased to prescribe in his Law what is lawful and right, and in this way restrict men to a certain rule, lest any should allow themselves to devise a worship of their own because he is a jealous God.

(2) Remember, that whatever offices of piety are bestowed anywhere else than on God alone, they are of the nature of sacrilege.

(3) Superstition attached divine honors to the sun and stars, or to idols: afterwards ambition followed—ambition which, decking man in the spoils of God, dared to profane all that was sacred.

(4) And though the principle of worshipping a supreme Deity continued to be held, still the practice was to sacrifice promiscuously to genii and minor gods, or departed heroes: so prone is the descent to this vice of communicating to a crowd that which God strictly claims as his own peculiar right!