



BRINGING THEM TOGETHER: THE CHALLENGE OF BLENDING FAMILIES

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(Genesis 29)



The family nest is being shaken as never before. Today, only one family in four consists of a mother and father and their biological children. If the current trend continues, more than half of all marriages occurring in a given year will end in divorce. In most developed countries, half of all births are to unmarried women. These factors and others eventually result in many remarried families with children, or blended families.

In the Scriptures we can clearly see that God considers children precious and that He is concerned about their welfare (Matt. 18:6, 7; Mark 10:14-16; Eph. 6:4; Col. 3:21). Certainly there are many single-parent homes where the children are dearly loved and well cared for, based on great sacrifice and hard work by the single parent. But we also know that children benefit from having two parents as they grow: Research clearly indicates that children living in a two-parent home, even a remarriage home, are significantly better off than children living in a single-parent home. But the blending of families brings with it a special set of challenges.

CHANGES AND LOSSES

Blended families involve children from previous marriages or relationships. They result when parents—divorced or never married—remarry or marry. Most contain children from only one of the newly married partners; however, some are comprised of children from both partners' previous relationships.

Consider the possible changes and adjustments for the new family's members: the end of (at least) one marriage, new living arrangements, new family members, a new school, the loss of friends, a new

church, a new last name. The children may be cut off from formerly close grandparents and relatives. In all remarriage families, loss and change present common emotional challenges.

DIFFERENT HISTORIES

Each member of the blended family has his or her own history, perceptions, and memories and is asked to merge and compromise them with those of other family members. What was once familiar is now reworked: Christmas and other holiday traditions, birthday celebrations, vacations, daily routines, etc. Personal history is not easily surrendered by someone who already has gone through many other changes.

Bible-based guidance is essential for remarriages resulting in blended families. Unfulfilled expectations are the major reason subsequent marriages end in divorce. There are expectations about parenting and discipline, finances, and how to express affection, respect, anger, and unhappiness. What about expectations concerning holidays and vacations? What about different rules during noncustodial visits? Assumptions are detrimental. Clarify expectations!

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WHAT'S NEW

1. Deal with children's feelings. Children feel normal and are not supposed to be sad. Memorialization is a normal part of life.
2. Acknowledge the loss. Acknowledge the loss of the previous family and the loss of the previous family members.
3. Establish new traditions. Establish new traditions and routines.

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RELATIONAL STRUGGLES

Children in remarriages need love, attention, discipline, understanding, and acceptance. Parents in blended families often struggle with loyalty issues arising from feeling that one's children need to be defended against the stepparent or stepsiblings.

The children may not be as thrilled about the remarriage arrangement as their parents are. This phenomenon is sometimes called "the myth of instant love" and can create problems unless understood and dealt with very early in the developing relationship of the blended family. Often, children feel that by loving and accepting a stepparent they are rejecting their biological parent, which can further complicate matters.

TWO FAMILIES

Visitation is an extremely common source of stress in blended families. The children will experience two realities, one with the blended family and the other with part-time visitation. Life can get even more complicated if the noncustodial parent remarries to create another blended family! Visitation arrangements also become tricky if the noncustodial parent lives far away. The feelings and needs of the children can create quite a challenging scenario for everyone.

WHAT'S A PARENT TO DO?

1. *Deal with family losses and transitions.* Children in blended families need time to feel normal again and should be encouraged to share their feelings of loss and their memories of how things used to be. Visitation time and events with the noncustodial parent should be respected.
2. *Acknowledge different developmental needs.* Parents can help themselves and their children by taking age and maturity level into consideration and not attempting to treat all the children the same way.
3. *Establish new family traditions.* While

not rejecting the traditions of the previous family life or of the noncustodial parent, the blended family should set out to create its own family traditions and events.

4. *Build a solid marital relationship.* Spouses must be intentional about taking time alone to love, support, and care for each other. A strong marriage is crucial to the entire transition and overall functioning of the family.

5. *Build a parenting coalition.* Be sure to include the non-custodial parent if at all possible. Children, especially teenagers, are greatly stabilized by seeing parents unified, having one voice. Mom and dad should try to minimize disagreement about the kids in their presence. Consistent parenting helps to alleviate children's insecurity following divorce and also builds their trust in the parental unit.

6. *Accept continual changes in family composition.* Children will come and go as visitation arrangements occur, and they may even wish to live with their other parent for a time. Perhaps a new baby or two will come along and further stir the emotional mix. The couple's commitment to each other and to their children, along with tolerance and patience in transition, will facilitate a smoother new beginning.

Those of us who work with blended families invariably find ourselves drawn back to the issue of what's best for the children. Simply stated, kids are better off with two parents than with one. Be courageous and committed. Blended families can work!

FURTHER MEDITATION:

Other passages to study about the issue of blended families:

- > Ruth 3:7-14
- > 2 Samuel 13:1-2
- > Esther 2:15-17

To Learn More: Turn to the key passage note on blended families at Genesis 21:9-11 on page 32. See also the personality profile of Jacob's family on page 45.

south; and in you and in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed. ¹⁵Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have spoken to you."

¹⁶Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it." ¹⁷And he was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven!"

¹⁸Then Jacob rose early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put at his head, set it up as a pillar, and poured oil on top of it. ¹⁹And he called the name of that place **Bethel;**^a but the name of that city had been Luz previously. ²⁰Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me, and keep me

in this way that I am going, and give me bread to eat and clothing to put on, ²¹so that I come back to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God. ²²And this stone which I have set as a pillar shall be God's house, and of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You."

JACOB MEETS RACHEL

29 So Jacob went on his journey and came to the land of the people of the East. ²And he looked, and saw a well in the field; and behold, there were three flocks of sheep lying by it; for out of that well they watered the flocks. A large stone was on the well's mouth. ³Now all the flocks would be gathered there; and they would roll the stone

28:19 ^aLiterally *House of God*

PERSONALITY PROFILE



Blended Families

JACOB'S BLENDED FAMILY

(GENESIS 29)

Jacob didn't plan on multiple wives; his father-in-law, Laban, had helped create that complication. The sisters Jacob married were so fiercely competitive that each put another woman in her husband's bed. Jacob fathered twelve sons and at least one daughter with four women. Though the events that shaped his family were bizarre, the results have a contemporary look: Jacob became the father of a blended family.

Jacob loved his wife Rachel, who had been his first love. He apparently treated the rest of the women in his life with care and respect, but he favored Rachel. Instead of helping Rachel see her unique position and deal with her jealousy toward her older sister, Jacob allowed the vicious battles to rage under his roof. He escalated the war by accepting other women into his bed.

Jacob also contributed to the chaos by obviously favoring Rachel's son Joseph. Instead of providing leadership in his home, Jacob allowed each person to struggle alone. He received cultural, but not genuine, respect from most of his sons. He allowed his family to drift into sin, hatred, and murder. He made little or no effort to intervene in desperate situations. He held his sons responsible for their mistakes, but he certainly bore part of the responsibility for his lack of clear direction. He caused most of his own deepest sorrows.

Blended families require special attention. They need more, not less, work than single couple families because the relationships increase in complication with the number of people involved. Individual children need to experience genuine love from someone, and parents are not automatically interchangeable. The challenge to make a blended family work requires the participation of everyone, particularly the adults. Passive parenting produces deadly results.

Blended parents who persist in depending on God, who regularly ask Him for wisdom, who take an active role in all their children's welfare, are pursuing the right path. The road has unusual difficulties. Those who follow the divine Guide find their way home.

To Learn More: Turn to the article about blended families on pages 46, 47. See also the key passage note at Genesis 21:9-11 on page 32.

HAGAR AND ISHMAEL DEPART

the child grew and was weaned. And Abraham made a great feast on the same day that Isaac was weaned.

⁹And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, scoffing. ¹⁰Therefore she said to Abraham, "Cast out this bondwoman and her son; for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, *namely* with Isaac." ¹¹And the matter was very displeasing in Abraham's sight because of his son.

¹²But God said to Abraham, "Do not let it be displeasing in your sight because of the lad or because of your bondwoman. Whatever Sarah has said to you, listen to her voice; for in Isaac your seed shall be called. ¹³Yet I will also make a nation of the son of the bondwoman, because he *is* your seed."

¹⁴So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water; and putting it on her shoulder, he gave it and the boy to Hagar, and sent her away. Then she departed and wandered in the Wilderness of Beersheba. ¹⁵And the water in the skin was used up, and she placed the boy under one of the shrubs. ¹⁶Then she went and sat down across from him at a distance of about a bowshot; for she said to herself, "Let me not see the death of the boy." So she sat opposite him, and lifted her voice and wept.

¹⁷And God heard the voice of the lad. Then the angel of God called to Hagar out of heaven, and said to her, "What ails you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heard the voice of the lad where he is. ¹⁸Arise, lift up the lad and hold him with your hand, for I will make him a great nation."

¹⁹Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. And she went and filled the skin with water, and gave the lad a drink. ²⁰So God was with the lad; and he grew and dwelt in the wilderness, and became an archer. ²¹He dwelt in the Wilderness of Paran; and his mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

A COVENANT WITH ABIMELECH

²²And it came to pass at that time that Abimelech and Phicol, the commander of his army, spoke to Abraham, saying, "God is with you in all that you do. ²³Now therefore, swear to me by God that you will not deal falsely with me, with my offspring, or with my posterity; but that according to the kindness that I have done to you, you will do to me and to the land in which you have dwelt."

²⁴And Abraham said, "I will swear."

²⁵Then Abraham rebuked Abimelech because of a well of water which Abimelech's servants had seized. ²⁶And Abimelech said, "I do not know who has done this thing; you did



Blended Families

KEY PASSAGE

BLENDING TWO FAMILIES

(21:9-11)

Blended families face special challenges, as Abraham discovered. From the beginning, it had been Sarah's idea to use Hagar, the slave girl, as a surrogate mother for their heir Ishmael (Gen. 16:1-16). But once Sarah had Isaac, her attitude quickly changed. By the time Isaac was born, Ishmael was a teenager. Some time later, when little Isaac was weaned, Ishmael "scoffed" (mocked him) at the family feast, setting off Sarah's anger (Gen. 21:9). In this case, God advised Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away, for the covenant promise was to be accomplished through Isaac. Yet God intervened miraculously to spare Hagar and Ishmael, showing His love and grace to the rejected woman and her child (Gen. 21:14-21).

Blended families need special wisdom from God in order to bring together two separate worlds and to love each other unconditionally. And for those who feel that they have been "sent away," God promises grace and provision, saying, "Fear not" (Gen. 21:17).

To Learn More: Turn to the article about blended families on pages 46, 47. See also the personality profile of Jacob's family on page 45.

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