

## Divorce and Blended Families

Genesis 35:22-26

**The word family once conjured similar images for most people.** We thought of Thanksgiving dinners, Christmas mornings, birthdays, tender moments, and sticking together through thick and thin. Today, however, other thoughts also come to mind - thoughts of weekends at Dad's, sharing rooms with stepbrothers and stepsisters, and holidays spent juggling schedules so each parent can share a portion of the time with their children.

**Today only 27 percent of American families fit the traditional model of two parents married "till death do us part," living with the children they both share.** In fact this scenario is now so rare that many refer to it as the "mythical family" - at best an endangered species, and at worst an irrelevant, outdated relic.

**What has happened to the family in the last twenty-five years?** To answer this question, we need to take a long, hard look at the trauma of divorce.

**Our relational vocabulary has expanded to include terms like binuclear family and no-fault divorce as we attempt to explain the changes that have taken place in the family over the last quarter of a century.** In the 1960s, 37 percent of all first-time marriages in America ended in divorce. Seventy-nine percent of those who divorced remarried, and 44 percent of those second marriages also ended in divorce. During the 1970s and 1980s the statistics grew even worse, with one of every two marriages ending in divorce. In forty-one American jurisdictions today, a spouse can terminate a marriage without the partner's consent and without proving fault.

**We are just beginning to understand the effects of divorce on individuals, families, and society as a whole.** One of every four

**children born in the 1980s will live in a stepfamily by age eighteen. In 90 percent of the divorces involving children, mothers retain sole custody, and even in joint custody situations, children spend only about 30 percent of their time with their fathers. Fifty-two percent of all divorced women have custody of minor children, and sadly, these children are the primary and most vulnerable victims of broken marriages.**

**The decline of the traditional family is changing the very landscape of childhood. Consider these sobering statistics:**

Twenty percent of American children grow up in poverty, a 21 percent increase since 1970.

There are 330,000 homeless children in our nation today.

The suicide rate among children and adolescents has tripled in the last thirty years.

The dropout rate among teenagers is rising, 27 percent currently drop out of high school.

The instance of child abuse nationwide has quadrupled since 1975.

In 1971, 6,500 teenagers were hospitalized in private psychiatric facilities in the U.S. By 1989 the number had reached almost 200,000.

The average American teenager has spent the equivalent of an entire work year watching television commercials alone by age eighteen.

**Recent studies have confirmed what many have feared for some time: The effects of divorce on children are often traumatic and long lasting. While many parents assume that their relief or happiness at the end of a difficult marriage will ultimately mean better lives for their children, this is not necessarily true.**

**Of the children interviewed, only 10 percent reported feeling relief at their parents' divorce. Almost 50 percent of the children of divorced parents were seen as worried, fearful of being left alone, underachieving, having low self-esteem, and sometimes angry and violent. A wide variety of long-term effects are evident in the children**

of divorce. As they approach adulthood, many of these children are unable to commit to love relationships of their own and experience clinical depression, guilt, and protracted grief.

In divorce children lose their family structure, the very thing that they depend on to support their development from childhood, through adolescence, and into adulthood. The loss can be confusing and emotionally crippling.

Navigating the swirling waters of divorce is a difficult task. It is hard enough for two people who are no longer husband and wife to continue to parent their children as an effective team. But when either ex-spouse remarries, the arrangement becomes even more complex. Now stepbrothers, stepsisters, a new set of grandparents, and a stepparent are added to an already awkward family equation. If a remarried parent has other children with the new spouse, the family can seemingly become a "cast of thousands."

Unlike the Bradys, most blended families do not exist in a "relational vacuum." There are grandparents. There are in-laws. There are ex-husbands and ex-wives. In the *Brady Bunch*, forming one loving family from two separate homes was a piece of cake, but in real life, it's a tremendous challenge.

Remember, in this series on the family, we have chosen to follow Jacob and his family. Therefore, for a more realistic picture of some of the obstacles and challenges a blended family might encounter, we will look back to the book of Genesis. The patriarch Jacob had twelve sons and four wives, two of whom were sisters.

It happened this way. Joseph's grandfather, Laban, had two daughters - Rachel, the younger, and Leah, the older. Jacob loved Rachel so much that he offered to serve Laban seven years for the right to be her husband. At the end of the seven years, a wedding took place. And when Jacob lifted his bride's veil, she wasn't Rachel, but her homelier sister, Leah. When he confronted his dishonest father-in-

law, Laban said it was not the practice of his people to marry the younger daughter before the elder. **Then he promised that in a week's time, he would give Jacob his daughter Rachel as well (for a price, of course: seven additional years of service to Laban).** So Jacob began his life as a husband with the two sisters as his wives.

**The competition, I am sure, was fierce.** Although Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah, God opened Leah's womb, and she began to bear him children. She named the first son Reuben, and she believed that his birth would win her Jacob's love. **She conceived again and bore a second son, whom she named Simeon.** Her third son was Levi. With the birth of each one Leah hoped that Jacob would grow more attached to her, for Rachel had not yet borne him a child. After the birth of a fourth son, Judah, Leah stopped bearing children.

**Rachel's heart was sick and she longed for children.** Her failure to have them as easily as her sister was one of the few things she and Jacob fought about. Finally Rachel sent her maid Bilhah to Jacob, and she bore him a son named Dan. **Rachel considered him her own, but Bilhah did not.** Bilhah conceived again and bore yet another son whom she named Naphtali. While Leah had borne no more children, not wanting to be outdone by Rachel's handmaid, she gave her own maid, Zilpah, to Jacob as a fourth wife. Zilpah had two sons; Gad and Asher were their names.

**A petty quarrel between Rachel and Leah caused Jacob to go back to the bed of Leah, and to their surprise she conceived yet again.** This child, another son, was named Issachar. The sixth and last son Leah gave to Jacob was called Zebulun, and afterward she bore him a daughter, Dinah.

**It was after Dinah's birth that God remembered Rachel's plight and opened her womb.** Joseph was the first son born to Jacob and Rachel. This longing granted, the greatest desire of Rachel's heart was for another son. **That son, Benjamin, was born as they were**

traveling to Bethlehem and Rachel died after his birth. She was buried on the way, and Jacob set a pillar over her grave.

That was Joseph's family: his father, Jacob, a mother who died when he was young, ten half-brothers, one half-sister, and a younger brother, Benjamin. They lived together in adjoining tents like a wandering tribe, and the strain was sometimes unbearable. Competition between wives and children was relentless. For his part, Jacob seemed unaffected by it all. But his family felt the tension of his choices every day of their lives.

Can't you imagine the animosity between the siblings in Jacob's household? "My mother's better than your mother," or "Dad loves me and my brothers best," or even more ridiculous, "Our tent is bigger than your tent."

Just their living situation fostered unbelievable rivalry. Frequently this continual strife resulted in violence, both inside the family and outside it.

It has been said that children become the reluctant bullets in the war of divorce. They provide both ex-spouses with ideal weapons in the ongoing game of vengeance since they are trusting, eager to please, and easily manipulated. In an article in People magazine feature on children of divorce, a young man in California expressed the pain of his parents' custody arrangement this way: "The divorce was like the marriage. They just split everything down the middle, including me." In addition to being used as weapons in their parents' battles, the young are exposed to increasing violence outside the home as well. Researchers say this chaos also results from a breakdown in the traditional nuclear family.

Growing up with only one parent's time, attention, discipline, and love is a handicap that is not easily overcome. The National Association of Elementary School Principals conducted a major

study of children from single-parent families. Their findings were quite significant. Thirty percent of two-parent elementary students were considered high achievers, as opposed to 17 percent of single-parent households. Single-parent students were also more likely to be absent, late, truant, and subject to disciplinary action than were students from two-parent households. Single-parent children were also twice as likely to drop out of school altogether. Seventy percent of the juveniles in state reform institutions grew up in single-parent or no-parent families.

Unfortunately, the undisciplined and angry youngsters are having a tremendous impact on our school system. Violence in our schools has become so common that most, if not all, of our public schools have established standard security precautions, that include police officers, just so students can attend class with some degree of safety.

What can we learn from these alarming trends? That there is no adequate substitute for the intact family unit. Nothing that educators, the government, psychologists, or sociologists can offer us successfully replaces a strong, supportive family in the life of a child. As much as we'd like to believe in the Brady Bunch, real-life blended families today bear a much stronger resemblance to Jacob's family. Jealousy, conflict, and anger too often evolve into dysfunctional situations, and sometimes, as in the case of Jacob's sons, acts of violence.

While raising a child alone is a formidable challenge, it is by no means a new one. The first single parent I know of is found in the Bible in the book of Genesis. Her name was Hagar and she was the maidservant of Sarah, wife of Abraham. God had promised Abraham and Sarah a whole nation of descendants, but they were very old and were childless. Sarah (apparently thinking that God needed a little help to keep His promise) sent her husband in to lie with Hagar so that a child would be conceived that Abraham and Sarah could

raise as their own. The child of Abraham and Hagar was named Ishmael, and he and his mother lived with Abraham and Sarah until he was a young teenager.

**Then when Abraham was one hundred years old, his son Isaac was born to Sarah, and that's when the trouble started. She quickly demanded that Hagar and Ishmael be banished.** So Abraham sent this single mother and her young son away to the wilderness with a skin of water and a loaf of bread. **When they had wandered far and were near starvation, Hagar left Ishmael crying under a bush and sat down opposite him, crying out to God.** Then Genesis 21:17-20 says, “And 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. Arise, lift up the lad and hold him with your hand, for I will make him a great nation. Then 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. So God was with the lad; and he grew and dwelt in the wilderness, and became an archer.”

**Single parents, God knows where you are and what you are going through.** Psalm 68:5-6 contains a promise that is particularly comforting to a mother who is raising her children alone. It says that God is “the father of the fatherless, and that He sets the lonely in families.”

**While some of the statistics I have shared with you today concerning blended families paint a bleak picture, it is by no means impossible to overcome the odds and raise up godly children in spite of a broken home.** Young Joseph is our biblical example of this truth. In my years as a pastor I've seen other examples as well, some of the best example of successful blended families are right here in our own church family.

**If you are a member of a blended or single-parent family today, let me encourage you and assure you that there is hope.** The

**answer is not simple and the journey may not be easy, but I promise you that has never been a problem that God cannot solve, regardless of the circumstances.**

If you have never been saved, why not today?

**Everyone please stand for prayer.**

Father,

Your Word is true. Give me the faith and courage to live my life in such a manner that my family might know that my love for You is real and my loyalties to them are steadfast. In Jesus' name. Amen