

A RIGHTEOUS AND HONORABLE PAIN
A Devotional Meditation from
Genesis 28:10-32:2; Hosea 12:12-14:9; Matthew 5:1-12, 19:8-9
Albert J. McCarn
November 13, 2021

Marriage is a hazardous enterprise even in the best circumstances. That's because marriage requires two distinct individuals to surrender themselves to become "one flesh," which means much more than simply a mated pair of male and female. As man and wife, they become a single unit, completing each other and functioning together to create a new house dedicated to the process of bringing human beings into the world and raising them up to perpetuate the cycle.



The Trial of Queen Catherine of Aragon, *Henry Nelson O'Neil*, [Birmingham Museums Trust, Birmingham, UK](https://www.birminghammuseums.org.uk/).

This hazardous undertaking becomes a life-threatening proposition when egos and politics come into play, as they did for the famous six wives of Henry VIII. His obsession with having a healthy son to succeed him as king of England colored his approach to marital relationships. Any wife who could not achieve this goal was subject to state-sanctioned consequences. His marriages to Catherine of Aragon and Anne of Cleves were annulled – which was especially awkward in the first case. That annulment brought the divorce of England from the Roman Catholic church, ignited the English Reformation, and set off a century of conflict with Spain. Nevertheless, those two women survived their matrimonial encounters. Three others did not: Anne Boleyn and Catherine Howard were beheaded, and Jane Seymour died after giving birth to Henry's only legitimate son. Catherine Parr, his last wife, survived because she outlived the old king.

History remembers Henry VIII as the monarch who set England on a course toward global power. I think of him as a sad man who was simultaneously a tyrannical oppressor, and a piteous victim of his times and circumstances. I think as well of the women – those he married and those he did not – who bore the worst of his tyranny, and of his children who received a skewed perspective of a husband and father. All three ruled England, but only one married, and none had children of their own.

This sad state of the English royal house seems to be the common state of humanity. We look to the Bible for comfort and hope, but even there we see people moving through life with a skewed sense of what is truly important. Women appear as little more than property, prizes, or bondservants. Children appear as appendages who have the potential to redeem the family name, or drive it into further disgrace. Even the stories of Israel's Patriarchs come off as the backdrop for God's commandments regulating marriage,

sexual conduct, and social interaction. The Patriarchs serve as examples of what not to do, which begs the question: why are they revered as models of righteousness?

The question comes to mind as we read about Jacob, who, like Henry VIII, took multiple wives. Both men had older brothers who were expected to step into the patriarchal roles of their fathers, but Henry's brother Arthur died prematurely, and Jacob's brother Esau sold his birthright. That's how each man stepped suddenly into prominence.

And that is where the similarities end. We can't even find much in common in that both men had multiple wives. The culture in which Jacob lived permitted a man to have more than one wife simultaneously, while Henry had only one at a time – as well as affairs with other women. None of Henry's concubines produced sons whom he could recognize and make part of the family, but the four sons by Jacob's concubines had an equal part in his family along with the eight sons by his two wives.

Then there's the question of why these two men entered marriage in the first place. Perhaps it's better to consider why one man walked out of his marriages while the other did not – even when that meant enduring the troubles of a household with two wives and two concubines, and multiple children by each. This may be the avenue toward understanding why the Bible regards Jacob as righteous.

Jacob did not set out to acquire more than one wife. He knew the story about his grandfather Abraham taking a wife for his son Isaac from their kin back in the old country, and likely expected Isaac to do the same for Esau and himself. After all, they were the covenant family, called by the Creator to establish a nation through which the Redeemer would come. The fact that his father and grandfather were both monogamous certainly had an impact on him; their faithfulness to Sarah and Rebecca was itself countercultural in an era when plural marriage was commonplace. Marrying into the local culture would endanger that calling, but that is precisely what Esau did – not once, but twice, taking two wives in rapid succession, and then taking a third wife from Uncle Ishmael's family when he belatedly realized his Hittite wives grieved his parents. Perhaps that is what persuaded Jacob and his mother Rebecca to resort to deception to make sure Isaac did not confirm the firstborn blessing on Esau. But the blessing would never come to pass if Jacob had no children, and thus he needed a wife. That, as well as the need to protect him from Esau's murderous wrath prompted his parents to send him away to find a wife from their kin in Aram.

As quickly as Abraham's servant had found Rebecca, Jacob found Rachel. It seems he was dealing honestly with her father Laban, offering to serve seven years for her hand in marriage, but then the unthinkable happened: Laban deceived him by sending Rachel's older sister Leah to Jacob on the wedding night.

Why did Jacob keep Leah as his wife, knowing how his father-in-law had broken their covenant and most likely coerced his daughter into going along with the deception? The Jewish sages say he did not divorce her because he was a righteous man. Though flawed in many ways, Jacob had a compassionate heart that moved him away from responding to this injury with yet more injury. Whatever Jacob chose to do in that moment would result in lifelong pain for everyone involved. Leah was hurting just as much as he and Rachel. Having taken her unwittingly to his marriage bed, how could he compound her

shame and pain by thrusting her aside? Seeing this, he chose to take much of that pain on himself and bear it with her to the day he laid her in the tomb of his fathers in Hebron.

The biblical story goes on to tell us how this decision led to many more hard choices, not the least being to have children by his wives' handmaidens at their urging. The result was a family of twelve sons and a daughter, mothered by four women. It is alien and incomprehensible to us how such a family could remain together, and yet they did. For all their considerable dysfunction, they remained a family. Jacob stayed faithful to them all, making the best of a bad situation none of them had sought.

Our Messiah was asked once why the Torah permitted divorce. He said:

Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. Now I tell you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.

Matthew 19:8-9 TLV

Jacob must have understood this divine principle. Leah had not committed sexual immorality, but instead had made a difficult choice of her own about honoring a father who proved himself unworthy of honor. She, too, was doomed regardless of her decision: either rebel against her abusive father and risk being thrust from the family, or throw herself on the mercy of the man intended for her sister. It was cold comfort that her husband kept her by his side rather than condemn her to a life of perpetual derision, but it was comfort nonetheless. She bore her own pain, as did her sister Rachel, and her husband Jacob. Which brings up another divine principle our Messiah mentioned:

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall be shown mercy.

Matthew 5:4, 7 TLV

We wonder why God would allow such a thing, but should we be surprised since we live in a fallen world? Sometimes our Creator wants to see how we will deal with impossible situations. It's how He tests our hearts to determine whether they are really inclined toward Him. As Jacob and his wives demonstrate, even impossibly bad situations have room for choosing life and honor, even if the choice brings pain. The truth is, our choices usually bring pain even in the best of circumstances. It's just that we're not always aware of who suffers the hurt, and how.