

## COPING WITH UNFAIR A Devotional Meditation from

Numbers 4:21-7:89; Judges 13:2-25; Genesis 6:5, 9:8-16;  
Matthew 1:18-25; 26:36-39; 1 Corinthians 2:14-16; Ephesians 5:21-33

Albert J. McCarn  
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My daughters may tell you that at times my fatherly advice to them would have been accurate, but unhelpful. I think of moments when, in anger and frustration, they might exclaim, "That's unfair!" only to have me respond, "Life is unfair."

To be honest, I don't recall exactly when such an exchange happened, but it's a valid description of those tense, awkward moments in the process of negotiating my children's transition to adulthood. On occasion my daughters had reason to feel that life is unfair, often due to circumstances over which none of us had any control.

It's more than simply not being able to get their way. This kind of unfairness is the inherent unfairness of our existence. It's almost as if the Creator designed adversity into the fabric of the universe so that, no matter what we do, even if we're obeying the rules and patiently waiting our turn, something robs us of justice. That gives us cause to question the fairness of life, and, by extension, the fairness of the Creator. That's when we tend to fall back on Christian clichés like this one:

Now a natural man does not accept the things of the *Ruach Elohim* [Spirit of God], for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. But the one who is spiritual discerns all things, and he himself is discerned by no one. For "who has known the mind of *ADONAI*, that he will instruct Him?" But we have the mind of Messiah.

1 Corinthians 2:14-16 TLV

Those are nice words, but they mean nothing if we don't bother to find out why the apostle wrote them. The hard things of scripture are there to motivate us to ask hard questions, not to accept blindly without understanding. Blind acceptance causes more problems than hard questions. Hard questions lead to crises of faith and eventual enlightenment, but blind acceptance makes us ignorant sheep susceptible to the clever arguments of false shepherds and wolves in sheep costumes.

Since I have daughters, I must ask hard questions about why the Bible seems to make women subordinate to men. Isn't that the message we receive from the oft-quoted passage about wives submitting to their husbands as to the Lord? That may be the message we receive, but only if we ignore the verse immediately before it:

Also submit yourselves to one another out of reverence for Messiah—

Ephesians 5:21 TLV



*Sad little boy. Photo: David Shankbone, May 2009, [via Flickr](#).*

When I ask what that means, the answer helps me understand that both men and women have an obligation to submit to one another in Messiah out of love, honor, and respect. That's the introduction to what the rest of the passage says about marriage:

wives [submit] to your own husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as Messiah also is head of His community—Himself the Savior of the body. But as Messiah's community is submitted to Messiah, so also the wives to their husbands in everything.

Husbands, love your wives just as Messiah also loved His community and gave Himself up for her to make her holy, having cleansed her by immersion in the word. Messiah did this so that He might present to Himself His glorious community—not having stain or wrinkle or any such thing, but in order that she might be holy and blameless. In the same way, husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.

Ephesians 5:22-28 TLV

That's not fair, of course. It really does seem to make the wife subservient to the husband, and unless he is fair minded, she might very well end up broken and battered by decades of emotional abuse. It's not a very pleasant outcome for liberated people in this age of self-esteem and disdain for ancient gender roles. But then, subordination of women appears to be a theme throughout the Bible, or so we might conclude from examples like that arcane jealousy ritual in Numbers 5:

*ADONAI* spoke to Moses saying, "Speak to *Bnei-Yisrael* [the children of Israel] and say to them: Suppose some man's wife goes astray and is unfaithful to him, and another man has sexual relations with her, but it is hidden from her husband's eyes and her impurity is not detected. Yet there was no witness against her and she was not caught in the act. Then a spirit of jealousy overcomes him and he is suspicious of his wife, when she is impure. Or a spirit of jealousy overcomes him and he suspects his wife, yet she is not impure.

Numbers 5:11-14 TLV

That's the introduction to this ritual of public humiliation. The husband takes his wife before the priest, who instructs her to drink bitter water as a test of her purity. The water contains dust from the Tabernacle floor, as well as ink from parchment on which the priest has written a curse that says the woman will die a painful death if she is guilty of unfaithfulness. If she is not guilty, then she will have the blessing of bearing children.

Why would any woman submit to such humiliation? Even if she is innocent, she still suffers shame simply because of the accusation. Why isn't her husband similarly humiliated? Where is the arcane ritual for him if she suspects he is unfaithful? It's so unfair!

But life is unfair, and this is all about life. The woman in that trial of faithfulness is us. We have an accuser who has marched up to our Creator, put his finger in His face, and said, "These people You created are corrupt beyond redemption. I demand that You deal with them according to You law!"

Are we guilty? Yes, and no. Our first ancestors made some unfortunate choices, and because of that we are stained both by separation from our Creator, and by the inclination

to make unfortunate choices of our own. The Creator knows every inclination of the thought of our heart is evil. That's why He allowed the water of judgment to take humanity from the earth once, long ago. But that's also why He promised never to let that water wash us away again. He loves us too much to leave us in this shameful state.

So, too, would a husband who may suspect his wife's unfaithfulness, but forgives and does all he can to help her be better than she is. Perhaps that is the kind of husband who would never bring his wife into the ritual of public humiliation. That was Joseph's decision when his espoused wife became pregnant.

But if an accuser demands justice, what choice does the husband have?

Actually, he has an important redemptive choice. There's nothing to prevent him from taking that bitter cup and drinking it so his wife doesn't have to. It might kill him, but at least she and all the community would know what genuine, sacrificial, redemptive love is.

Come to think of it, that child Joseph's wife delivered in a manger long ago once wrestled with His heavenly Father about drinking a bitter cup. His solution was to drink it down so that the world He loved so much would not perish, but have everlasting life.

It's not fair, but it is life.