

Deut 25:5-10 Levirate Marriage

I'm sure we are all aware of how the institution of the family is under threat these days. It's a disgrace how people live. Many people live together without bothering to get married. Many people have children without getting married. Children end up being raised by single parents, which leads to all manner of social problems.

Some of these problems happen because people make sinful decisions. But some family problems happen through the providence of God. Some families experience the untimely death of a spouse, and the family has to carry on without that person.

Deut 25:5-10 provides some details about what to do in a very particular set of circumstances. A family tragedy has happened; a married man dies before he has had the chance to have any children. The man leaves a childless widow behind. What is to become of her? Moses tells Israel what to do in such circumstances.

Obviously, we are not Israel, and the directions given to us here do not pertain to us directly. However, underlying these directions are timeless principles that pertain to our families. We may not practice levirate marriage, but we can see the values here that help maintain and strengthen families.

Family life ought to be a high priority for us. We should be focused on maintaining and strengthening our family relationships.

Note several principles that may help us maintain and strengthen our families.

- I. .5 Family tragedy happens.
 - A. The case in view pertains to a set of brothers who all inherited land from their father—they “dwell together.”
 1. That does not mean that they were all living in the same house. Maybe they are, but not necessarily.
 2. To “dwell together” means that a set of brothers are living on and working their family allotment, i.e., the land they received as an inheritance from their father. So they own the property together. That was the specific case in view—a set of brothers living together on property inherited from their father.

It appears that the Jews could apply this principle more broadly to near kinsmen, as in the case of Boaz and Ruth. Boaz was *not* Ruth's brother-in-law, but he was closely related. You may recall that someone else was a closer relative to Ruth's dead husband, but he refused the right to marry Ruth. Because of that, Boaz was able to play the role of the husband's brother—even though, technically, he was not.

- B. In any case, the problem here is that the man died. He was married but died before he produced any children. It was a tragedy for the man and his family...
- C. And of course it was a tragedy for the widow. Childless widows in those days did not have many prospects for a happy life. What's to become of her? Typically, women did not own much property. They normally did not inherit wealth. A stable life for women depended on the man they married.
- D. Levirate marriage is a way of taking care of the widow by providing her with a spouse and, potentially, children.

App: We live in a broken world where family tragedies happen. Beloved family members die. The longer you live, the more you will personally experience family tragedy. As you get older, you will grieve over the deaths of family members and loved ones.

Sadly, young people also suffer tragic circumstances. Even newlyweds suffer tragedy in some cases. Young women become widows. Suffering this kind of thing is part of the human condition. We live in a fallen world.

Family tragedy happens; it's very sad, but it's a normal part of life. And God cares about us when such things happen. God cares about childless widows. God set up these rules to address a tragedy like this.

When tragedy strikes....

- II. .5b Family cohesion is very important.
 - A. Families must stick together, especially when tragedies happen. Moses is concerned here that the widow would remain within the family into which she married.
 - B. She should not be married to a "stranger," that is, someone outside the family of the man she married. She should not marry an outsider.
 - C. .5c Instead, her husband's brother—i.e., her brother-in-law—should take her as his wife.

1. In those days, polygamy was allowed. It was never ideal, but it was tolerated.

A man could take on another wife, as long as he provided the basic requirements—food, clothing, housing, and marital rights (Ex 21:10-11).

2. But it seems most likely that this husband's brother referred to an *unmarried* brother. The Jews traditionally understood the husband's brother to be the oldest unmarried brother. It was his responsibility to fulfill this obligation.

D. Normally, according to the OT law, marrying a brother's wife is not allowed. Lev 18:16 specifically prohibits marrying a sister-in-law. In Lev 20:21, Moses calls such a marriage an unclean thing.

E. But this was the exception to that rule. A man could—in fact, should—marry his sister-in-law *when these conditions pertained*. In fact, it was expected.

App: As I've said before, life is messy and complicated, and sometimes we cannot fulfill the ideal. God "knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust." God makes some accommodations for human tragedy. Sometimes, there are exceptions to the rules.

Divorce is an exception to the rule that marriage is supposed to be permanent. In some cases, there are exceptions that allow us to solve very difficult problems.

Life for some people is not going to be ideal. Bad things happen, people make decisions, and life turns out differently than we had hoped. The ideal escapes us. But God still provides for us. God is merciful and gracious in spite of our failures and faults.

What does God provide in this situation?

F. The practice in view here is called *levirate* marriage because the Latin word for "husband's brother" is "levir."

Trans: Family is so important that God established a means of keeping a family together after it experienced profound tragedy. Tragedy is often uncontrollable, but we can control how we respond to it as a family. Families must pull together after a tragedy. We must support and encourage one another in difficult times. We must care for one another through the trials of life.

III. Children are important. .6

- A. In the Hebrew community, children were very important. Children were the future. A man's children would inherit all of his property and would fulfill God's promises to Abraham by prospering in the PL.
- B. Failure to produce an heir was considered to be something of a disaster and calamity. For a man to have his name blotted out from Israel because he did not produce an heir was a terrible prospect.
- C. The main reason for levirate marriage was so that the firstborn son would take the place of his dead father. That would accomplish two things:
 - 1. The name of the dead man would continue. His name would not be "blotted out of Israel." I.e., the first son born to the brother-in-law would stand in the place of his dead father; he would continue that family line for his father. The name of the dead man would be carried forward.
 - 2. The son would inherit all the property of his father. So the property would stay within the family.
- D. .6 So the procedure here was *not* primarily for the benefit of the widow. It was certainly good that she found a home and was cared for. But the purpose for this arrangement is that the widow would produce a son, and he would carry on the legacy of his father. The son would inherit everything his father owned, and he would take the status of his father.

[By the way, Moses had already stipulated that, if no sons are born, daughters could inherit their father's property (Num 27:1-8 – the five daughters of Zelophehad). Normally, the sons would be the heirs. But if no sons were born, then daughters could inherit.

But in this particular case of levirate marriage, it appears as if the child in view is a son—a male heir. If the man dies without producing a son, then the brother-in-law should marry the widow in the hopes of producing a son, who would then step into the place of his dead father. It was a man who died, so it makes sense that a man would take his place in the family.]

App: Carrying on the family line/name is still important. I don't have a son, but my two daughters will continue the family line. That's important to me.

A further important principle here is that Christian couples should plan to have children. That should be the normal outcome of marriage.

And we should have an interest in future generations; we should want our descendants to prosper. We should want to leave an inheritance for them. We should want to see 3-4 generations after us prosper because of us.

IV. Lack of family loyalty is disgraceful. .7-10

A. Moses next brings up the potential that a man might not want to marry his dead brother's wife. He might want to avoid this responsibility.

1. Perhaps he does not like the woman. Maybe she is an unpleasant or unappealing woman.
2. Perhaps the marriage would be an economic burden that the man wants to avoid.
3. Perhaps he does not want to complicate his own family relationships or prospects. Maybe he had his eye on another girl.

In the case of Ruth, a nearer kinsman declined the option to marry Ruth because it would have complicated his own family situation.

4. Moses does not say why the man does not want to marry the woman; he simply says, "the man does not want to take his brother's wife."
5. So this responsibility is *expected* of the brother-in-law, but not absolutely *required*. He should marry the widow, but if he absolutely refused, he didn't have to marry her.
6. If the man refuses this obligation, there is a certain procedure to carry out. There will be consequences for his failure to fulfill this responsibility. Refusal to take up this moral obligation will result in his being disgraced in various ways.

B. .7 The widow exposes her brother-in-law to shame and disgrace.

1. She goes to the gate of the city where they live. The elders of the city would generally conduct business at the city gate.

2. The widow would gather some of the elders of the city and make a charge against the brother-in-law who refused to marry her. She accuses him of refusing to “raise up the name” of his brother; he will not perform the duty of the husband’s brother.
3. .8a After verifying that the charge is true, the elders of the land try to convince the man to take on this responsibility.
They exhort him to fulfill this obligation. This was expected of him; it was right for him; this was custom and tradition.
4. .8b The man might still refuse. He won’t change his mind.
5. If he is stubborn in his refusal to take her, then the widow removes the man’s sandal, spits in his face, and proclaims the statement at .9end.
 - a) Spitting in one’s face was a very serious insult; it was a disgraceful act, an act of contempt and shame. The widow is showing that this man is shameful and contemptible; he’s a disgrace to the family and the community.
 - b) In this case, taking off the sandal signified that the man refused to fulfill his obligation. He is exposed as one who did not care about his extended family. He was a disgrace, and everyone in the city gate knew it.

Servants and slaves walked about with no shoes on. This man had his shoe removed, implying that he should be thought of as the lowest of the low. He should be ashamed of himself.
6. .9b Note the charge: he refuses to “build up his brother’s house.”
 - a) The brother-in-law would build up his brother’s house by providing an heir that would retain the dead man’s name and property. But the brother-in-law refused to fulfill this obligation. On top of the tragedy of the man’s death is the further tragedy that the one who could fulfill this responsibility refuses to do so.

b) That would have been a very serious charge—the man lacked loyalty to his family. He’s a disgrace to the family. He didn’t care about the health and welfare of his own dead brother’s family. He cared more about his own concerns than he did about his brother’s family. He’s a contemptible and shameful person who deserves public humiliation.

7. .10 From that time on, the man who refused this responsibility is called “the house of him who had his sandal removed.” To go barefoot was a disgrace and a humiliation for the Hebrews (cf. Isa 20:2-3; Mic 1:8; 2 Sam 15:30).

And notice it says, “the house of him...” So it was a mark of disgrace for his entire household—his whole family would bear this shame.

8. So this procedure encourages levirate marriage and discourages refusal by those who have this responsibility. This was a recognized duty that one could refuse, but it was a great humiliation and disgrace for the one who refused it.

App: It’s very sad in our present context that so many people behave disgracefully as it pertains to family life. People behave disgracefully when they live together without being married. It’s a disgrace when people get divorced without proper biblical grounds. It’s a disgrace when parents refuse to discipline their children. It’s a disgrace when parents fail to bring their children up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. It’s disgraceful when children refuse to honor and obey their parents.

In our culture, we don’t have a ritual like this to expose this shameful conduct. People don’t have a sense of shame anymore. Many people engage in shameful, disgraceful conduct and have no sense of regret. They have little or no loyalty to family and don’t care about the other members of the family. They behave disgracefully and bring disrepute on their family.

Obviously, this teaching on levirate marriage does not pertain *directly* to us. We do not practice levirate marriage. Young women today have many more options and opportunities than were available to them in the ANE. We don’t conduct family business in public, spit in anyone’s face, or pull off anyone’s shoe.

However, we still have family relationships, and we should try to strengthen and build up our families. We do that, primarily, by fulfilling our family responsibilities.

We all have family responsibilities, and we must fulfill them, even when it's a sacrifice, even when it's uncomfortable and costly. Family life is much more enjoyable when everyone in the family fulfills his/her role.

Sometimes we have to make sacrifices for the benefit of the family. Marrying this widow would probably have been something of a sacrifice for the husband's brother. But he should have made that sacrifice for the benefit of his family.

If you fail to fulfill your family responsibilities, it is a shame. You are failing to build up your brother's house. You are failing to do your part for the health and welfare of the family. It's unlikely that anyone will pull off your shoe and spit in your face, but it certainly is true that you are behaving disgracefully if you refuse to build up your brother's house.

After your relationship with God, your relationship to your family is of next greatest importance. Don't disgrace your family by shameful conduct. Fulfill your family responsibilities. Build up your brother's house. Your family will thank you.